The photo on our December cover is just that – a real photo, not an artist’s rendition or figment of imagination, but rather a place where I found myself back in 2000. I was on my second trip to Scotland. The previous year I was there with my son. This time I was on my own, in more ways than one, charged with driving on the opposite side of the road through cities and countrysides (with even the shifter and clutch on the opposite side), listening hard to find words I could understand mixed in with the many brogues I encountered, converting my American dollars into British pounds on the fly, deciphering directions often written in Gaelic, and making my way 100% on my own from B&B to B&B with no set plans except to see Scotland and to revisit the Isle of Skye, the birthplace of my family name. My experiences were many, as were the gifts I received both in scenic vistas and history lessons recited to me as if they happened just yesterday.

It was February but there was no snow to be seen until just before I reached the top of a hill near the beautiful site on our cover, when a slight amount of snow began falling. I was worried at what might be over the hill and so I decided to stop and relax for a minute. I walked down a trail and the view shown on the cover of this issue of Celtic Guide presented itself to me. I ran back to the car to get my camera, my video camera and my tape recorder (no iPhones yet). I photographed, I videoed, I recorded. And I was home – home in the land where my very soul belonged.

A week later I returned to American shores a different person. My interest in Scotland and Ireland, which had been with me my entire life, now transcended description or interpretation. I was a Celt! And, through many writings with various magazines, newsletters, and websites, I became a guide to things Celtic - I literally became a Celtic guide. I’ve done my best these last five years to be your Celtic guide, to bring you stories, music, art and ideas for the most part not found elsewhere. What next year will bring is yet to be determined. What’s just over the hill can wait. I’m going to take a break and enjoy the scenery for awhile.

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From The Editor . . .

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Although the exact date is unknown, Christianity was most likely introduced into the British Isles some time during the first century. This definitive event in the history of Europe is often associated with Joseph of Arimathea, who makes an all-too-brief appearance in the Gospel Accounts as the member of the Jewish Sanhedrin who obtains permission from the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate to take Christ's body down from the cross and gives him a decent burial in a new tomb hewn out of rock.

It is this fleeting glimpse of the man that has inspired the most intense curiosity, and myths aplenty have sprung up to fill in the gaps with regards to his identity and life’s story.

One pious legend has it that Joseph was the younger brother of St. Joachim, the husband of St. Anne and father of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If so, this would also have made him the uncle of Mary and the great-uncle of Jesus.

If true, this might explain a great deal about why he would take it upon himself to care for the body of the crucified carpenter, even though such a move might have jeopardized his position among the Sanhedrin who had sentenced Christ to death.
But prior to these momentous events, Joseph was said to have amassed a small fortune as a merchant under the employ of the Roman government, using his fleet of ships to carry lead and tin from Cornwall to Phoenicia and other trading centers throughout the Roman Empire. Making regular ventures to Britain would have possibly enabled him to become familiar with the beliefs, customs, and way of life of the Celtic peoples inhabiting the western Isles.

Living in Marmorica, Egypt, for a time, he eventually returned to his homeland of Judea and settled in the town of Arimathea, eight miles north of Jerusalem. This would have been a decision most likely based upon the close proximity to the Holy City which he would have had to visit regularly as a voting member of Sanhedrin and a pillar of Judaism’s religious leadership.

The next phase of the legend deals with Joseph’s journeys abroad with the Blessed Mother and the Christ Child. These tales maintain that Joseph went on his travels once again…but this time accompanied by family. It is presupposed that St. Joseph the Carpenter had already died, and Joseph of Arimathea made the decision to take his niece and teenaged grand-nephew under his wing. Hence, when he returned to the British Isles on a tin-trading mission, Jesus and Mary traveled with him. SETTLING ON THE SHORES OF CORNWALL IN A WADDLE HUT THAT THE BLESSED MOTHER HELPED BUILD WITH HER OWN HANDS, THE THREE OF THEM EASED INTO AN INTERMEDIATE PERIOD OF LIFE BEFORE THE MINISTRY OF CHRIST COULD BEGIN.

While there, the youthful Jesus was said to have encountered the Celtic Druids schooled in the “oak wisdom” of their native spirituality, and proceeded to astound them with his depth of understanding just as he had astounded the Jewish priests in the Temple of Jerusalem when he went missing for three days at age 12. After long exchanges with him, they proceeded to declare him as “Arch-Druid” (meaning, in their way, one who had achieved the greatest level of spiritual enlightenment and connectivity with the divine) and, like the Zoroastrian Magi who came to pay him homage at his birth, they foretold that greatness was in him and would come through him.

Fact or fiction, these legends died hard in the villages of Cornwall. Well into the 19th century, the locals maintained that the holy visitors had indeed pitched camp on their shores and blessed the rocks around them. When striking ore, it was also customary for Cornish miners to cry out the traditional signal: “St. Joseph was a tinner!”

These traditions are vaguely alluded to in the medieval English carol, “I Saw Three Ships”, which depicts Christ and the blessed Virgin traveling by ship:

I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day,
I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning

And what was in those ships all three
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day?
And what was in those ships all three
On Christmas Day in the morning?

Our Saviour Christ and His Lady
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day,
Our Saviour Christ and His Lady
On Christmas Day in the morning

William Blake, the eighteenth-century poet and mystic who spent much time in Cornwall as a boy, was also inspired by the legends and integrated them into his inspirational hymn, “Jerusalem”:

And did those feet in ancient times
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark, satanic mills?
Bring me my bow of burning gold;
Bring me my arrows of desire;
Bring me my spear; oh, clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I shall not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hands
Till we have builded Jerusalem
In England’s green and pleasant land

Whether or not Jesus and Mary ever did visit pre-Roman Britain, Joseph of Arimathea’s appearance on the British scene is certainly not an impossibility. The Romans did carry on a lively trade with the Britons long before the actual Roman conquest and colonization of Britannia, and Jewish merchants were not uncommon within the economically prosperous network of Pax Romana.

Years later, on that fateful Holy Week, some speculate that Joseph may have been the custodian of the Upper Room in which Jesus and the Apostles celebrated the Last Supper. It is also theorized that his table-cloth from the Last Supper was used to wrap Christ’s body in, which ultimately became known as the Shroud of Turin.

Small pieces of evidence supporting this claim include the fact that the Shroud is made of different material than usually used for Jewish burial rites, and it has wine stains on it that contrast with the marking of blood. Because of the Sabbath, it may have been impossible to purchase anything else fitting for burial.

As a result of these merciful gestures on behalf of his late kinsman, Joseph was said to have suffered persecution at the hands of the Sanhedrin he had once served as a respected member. Legend holds that he was even imprisoned by them for sympathizing with the blasphemer, only to be miraculously released by Christ on the eve of his Resurrection. But then Pontius Pilate launched a persecution of those claiming Christ had risen in the wake of these tumultuous events, and Joseph was forced to flee Jerusalem.

He joined the Apostle Philip, Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene in Gaul, and together they began to preach the glad tidings to the people there. Further legends involve how he had carried along a special possession: the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and which Joseph had supposedly used to catch the blood flowing from Christ’s side after he was pierced with a lance on the cross. As a precious Christian relic, it was sought out for destruction by the Roman authorities, making it necessary to get it out of Judea in haste.
But Joseph, with as fervent a wander-lust as ever, felt restless in Gaul. Something in his heart told him that there were other missions for him to fulfill. One night, his deepest feelings were confirmed. As he lay sleeping in his hut, a brilliant flash of light awakened him, and he saw an angel shrouded in a cloud of incense standing before him.

“Joseph of Arimathea,” the heavenly visitor addressed him, “cross thou over to Britain and preach the glad tidings to Arvigarus. And there, where a Christmas miracle shall come to pass, do thou build the first Christian church in that land.”

Obeying the angelic command, Joseph readied himself to leave Gaul. Procuring a small ship, he set sail with eleven other Christian missionaries, intending to weigh anchor near Land’s End and his old stomping grounds in Cornwall. There he could make contact with some of his old business associates and properly plan for his missionary activities. But this was not to be. Channel storm blew them off course, and their ship ran aground in the marshlands around what is now Somerset.

Joseph and his companions were brought before their local ruler, Arvigarus, and explained that they had come to Britain to share a story…namely, the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Impressed by their courage and frankness, he did give Joseph and his companions’ permission to preach. Furthermore, he let them make their base on Avalon (also known as Ynis-Avallach, “the island of apples”, or Ynis-witren, “the island of glassy waters”), and divided the land into Twelve Hides, one for each of the missionaries. Today, this place is identified as modern-day Glastonbury, presumably surrounded by marshland way back when and mistakenly thought to be an island.

The location was more than significant, considering that Avalon had long been held sacred by the Celtic pagans as one of the “thin places” where contact could be made between mortals and the divine. The Tor, a structure built on one of the hills, was said to be a portal where gods, goddesses, and the faery folk could cross the thresholds of different worlds and visit the land, bringing either a blessing or a curse depending on the circumstances. It was one of the locations associated with the legends of *Tir na Nog*, the Isle of the Blessed said to bestow Eternal Youth in a realm outside of time. Thinking back on the legend of the Christ Child’s encounter with the Druids, this meeting of old and new faiths on sacred ground holds profound meaning.

Joseph and his fellow Christians were escorted across the marshlands and thereupon scaled one of the hills presumably to get a good view of what was to be their new home. When they reached the summit, the exhausted Joseph of Arimathea rested his weight on his hawthorn staff, which was said to be made with pieces of Christ’s Crown of Thorns.

Immediately, the staff took root and blossomed with a cluster of beautiful white flowers.

Since it was Christmas Eve of 63 A.D., Joseph took the sign to be a fulfillment of the angel’s prophecy and built a mud-and-wattle church dedicated to Our Lady on that spot, which came to be known as “Weary-all Hill”. The staff of Joseph continued to flourish and blossom every year on Christmas and Easter.

The Holy Grail, which he had brought to Britain wrapped in a cloth of white samite, was placed beneath the first altar to be raised in the land within the first church built on that spot. He later hid it at the bottom of a well, which afterwards gushed red-tinted water, now known as “Chalice Well” or “Blood Well.”

As for Joseph, his burial place remains unknown, and yet it is said that he rests somewhere amidst the ancient ruins and lands of Glastonbury, where his sacred chalice and blooming staff remained visible signs of the miracle that would transform old Europe into Christendom.
In Arthurian mythology, the search for the Holy Grail brought Sir Galahad into contact with “The Fisher King,” a custodian of the Grail who was said to be the descendent (whether in physical or spiritual sense) of Joseph of Arimathea.

Galahad, the son of the rakish Sir Lancelot, is the only one able to find the Grail because he stands out from the other knights for his purity of heart. However, after he dies in ecstasy, the Grail once again disappears into the mists of Avalon.

By the same token, King Arthur himself is said to have crossed the waters to reach Avalon after being grievously wounded during the Apocalyptic Battle of Camlann. His enchanted sword Ex Caliber was then cast into the waters and received by the majestic immortal being, The Lady of the Lake. His ghost, in black armor, is still said to haunt the lands, while the remains of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere are said to be buried in the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey.

Of course, there are those who set out to debunk all these legends as completely falsified. Some claim that the Glastonbury Thorn was really brought back to Glastonbury Abbey by a zealous crusader who picked it up somewhere in Palestine during the Middle Ages, although it certainly has been proven that it did originate in the Middle East. Also, tests on the water from Chalice Well have shown that it has a very high iron-content, which explains its unusual red tint.

As for Arthur and Guinevere, it’s almost certain the “discovery” of their bodies was a hoax rigged by King Henry II who wanted to discourage the legend that Arthur would return as a champion for the Celtic peoples. Since the king was one of their main benefactors, the monks of Glastonbury seem to have decided it prudent to play along. However, as with most mythologies, there is almost always a kernel of truth from which the embroidery sprung, not to mention spiritual truths that transcend the merely factual.

Touching on Joseph of Arimathea, if other early Christians such as St. Paul traveled across the Roman Empire to spread their religion, why would it be unreasonable to believe that he might return to the land where he spent so much time in order to proclaim the glad tidings?

As for the Glastonbury Thorn, its blooming on Christmas and Easter was a continued spectacle for generations, in spite of it being hacked down more than once by nay-sayers.

One of the most famous acts of vandalism against the Throne was committed by one of Cromwell’s Puritan soldiers during the English Civil War. Seeing it as a symbol of “popery”, he zealously struck it with his sword...causing splinters to strike him in the eyes and blind him for life. Meantime, the local Catholics and Anglicans collected pieces from the thorn and had them re-grafted in several different places across Glastonbury. It became a symbol of the British spirit of endurance and resilience, and it became customary to send a branch to the reigning monarch every Christmas.

So whether it was Joseph of Arimathea or someone else who first planted the Glastonbury Thorn in British soil, the fact remains that it did take root, blossomed, and bore much fruit. The true flowering was the love and truth of Christ that spread across the land and transformed the culture into something new and beautiful while also borrowing greatly from the traditions and spiritual wisdoms found in the old.

Even the Holy Grail shared many similarities with the Magic Cauldron from Celtic mythology, as both promised to satisfy the longings of and fully restore life to the body and soul, and bring about completeness and unity within every person. In this way, we can see that mythical meeting between Jesus and Druids coming to fruition.
Gus Lightbody had heard of raves being held in forests before. Great idea, he had thought. What better place to hear music? Especially this kind of music. And what better place for people to come together and dance? It was like the 60s.

So the idea of a rave in a forest had always been attractive to Gus and now that he found himself at one, he wasn’t disappointed. It was a great buzz.

The best thing about it was the fresh air. And the stars overhead were great. Gus kept looking up at them. The combination of the strobe light, the stars and the fresh air was exhilarating. And there was the music, of course.

The whole thing had been very well organised. Lanterns hung from the branches of trees had guided Gus and his buddies to the place. Gus had loved that. It had given the wood an enchanted feel. Once they had reached the clearing, there were already hundreds of people there and the music was loud. Loud and clear. And it was all kept well secret so that there were no rude interruptions ruining everyone’s good time.

It was the best nightclub in the world.

Now it was approaching dawn. When Gus looked up at the sky, he saw that it was turning blue and the stars were disappearing. The strobe had been turned off. He looked around for his buddies. There was no sign of them. But there were still plenty of people dancing. They were determined to make the most of it and so was Gus.

He could see the DJ behind the decks. He was on a platform which made him visible to all. It was good to be able to see the DJ. He had always struck Gus as being a cool, authoritative figure. Now in this natural setting his authority seemed enhanced. He was a like a druid leading all on an emotional and spiritual journey which could only be made through music. Music, people and dance. Gus wanted to go up to the DJ and tell him this. As a younger man he probably would have, but now he kept the thought to himself as he knew he would probably just be laughed at.

He felt a light wind brushing against him. He was surprised. It was the first of the night and they were so deep in the forest that he wondered how any wind could make its way to them. But it was nice. He closed his eyes against it, enjoying the sensation.

When he opened them again, he found that it
was brighter and there was somebody dancing with him. It was a man. He was the tallest man Gus had ever seen. He must have been about seven feet tall. He had long red hair which was brushed behind his ears, ears which were ringed all round. He was dressed in a long black robe which was covered in silver stars about the size of a child’s hand. Beneath this he wore a t-shirt with a smiley face on it. For trousers he had a pair of baggy, blue jeans. He danced by nodding his head to the beat and moving his hands around as if he were tying an elaborate, invisible knot. The fingers of his hands were heavily ringed. He must have been about Gus’ age. He smiled at the man and the man smiled back. Then he spoke to Gus and even though the music was far too loud for him to be heard, Gus found that he could hear him perfectly clearly, as if the voice was in his head. “You’re not happy,” were the words he spoke.

Gus was surprised. “What?” he said.

“You’re not happy,” the man repeated.

Gus wanted to tell the guy to shag off, but he found himself saying, “I know.”

“Why don’t you come with me?” asked the man.

“Where?”

“To another place. You might like it better.”

Gus wanted to refuse him but, again, the words he spoke were contrary to his wishes. “Okay,” he said. He felt like his words weren’t his anymore. He felt distant from them. As if he were speaking in a dream.

“Follow me,” said the man and he turned around and started walking to the nearest trees. Gus followed.

Once they were in the trees, it was darker again, but Gus could still see the man clearly. The stars on his robe seemed to be shedding their own luminescence. After about half a minute, the man stopped and held up his right hand. He started to wave it. Gus tried to look beyond to see who he was waving at, but there was only darkness. Then something strange happened. A ball of light like a star appeared before the man’s waving hand. As the man continued to wave, it grew in size until at last it was a shimmering diamond shape the size of a doorway. Then the man stopped waving and put his hand back in his robe. He looked behind him at Gus so that Gus could see his profile. He had a rather large nose.

“Follow me,” he said and stepped into the light.

I currently have four books for sale online –
• Captain Jack: Father of the Yukon
• Ebenezer Denny: First Mayor of Pittsburgh
• Catholic Boys: McCartney, Springsteen and Buffett
• Holy Alliance: The Vatican and The White House

I will soon have a fifth book McUsdean about my family’s legacy, mostly involving the MacDonalds of Sleat and the Lordship of the Isles, with considerably more about the beginnings of the Scotch-Irish race.

Captain Jack is a longer in depth study. The remaining three, while still in depth, are quick reads. I invite you to look them up on Amazon or Create Space and just maybe you’ll want to purchase one or more of them. I hope so.
In the course of my current research into the folklore of the ales and meads of northern Europe, I came across a mention of a drink considered to be northern Scotland’s panacea. Called Atholl Brose, one manuscript just said that it was a mixture of Scotch whisky and honey, and another mentioned that it was to be used on a daily basis to keep the body strong and healthy, and that it was even a better cure for colds than turpentine.

Better than turpentine? Wow! With a glowing review like that, it has to be good! Turpentine had been used for health reasons, though, so it’s not entirely a bad comparison. When you’re in a country that historically had to bleed its cattle during the winter for the calories (mixing it with oatmeal), you tend to make do with what you have. Even if that means sometimes using what’s generally a sheep medicine.

Atholl Brose, though, sounds like ambrosia straight from the mead rivers of Tir na nOg! Its name is derived from the Scots word for uncooked oatmeal, “brose,” and the region from which in it was legendarily created. The drink itself is fairly simple: whisky mixed with honey. Then many added cream and a slight few added eggs or egg whites. And there are a lot of recipes for this out there, some very modern and some hundreds of years old. I tried out the three cream-added recipes and will share this later in this article.

But first, folklore! I have found two stories giving the origin for this delicious drink, and have written them in my own style. The first involves the grand beast of the Isles, the giant. In this case, the Giant of Atholl.

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James Slaven
USA

**CG drawing made from author’s photo showing whisky after the oatmeal had been strained out.**

*“British Giant” by Arthur Rackham — public domain*
In the ancient land of Atholl, high up in the northern wilds of Scotland, lived the terrible Giant of Atholl. This giant terrorized the lands all around and every hero that attempted to stop him found their way in to the giant’s stew pot. With the giant stealing all of their cattle and grain, the local clans were on the verge of starvation.

And so came Dougal the Hunter, who decided it was time to teach this giant a lesson in manners. Rather than attack head on, having learned the dangers of this from those that went before him, he tracked the giant to his cavern lair and snuck around to see if there was a better way. After three days, Dougal began to despair that it was an impossible task.

On the third day, though, it dawned on Dougal that the giant would drink deeply from his cup at the end of the day (well, I say cup, but it was a hollowed-out boulder, which is cup-sized for a giant). In the giant’s store room, Dougal took sacks of oats, jars of honey, and vats of whisky. He poured the oats and whisky into the cup, stirring it into a thick porridge, and added the honey to disguise the alcohol. The giant came home, found the sweet drink, and guzzled deeply, not bothering to think about where it came from. Perhaps life had been so easy and unthreatening, that he saw no reason to fear anything. Then again, perhaps this giant was just not very smart.

After quaffing the entire potion, the giant happily passed out and started snoring, having whisky-fueled dreams of giantesses and mutton. Dougal crept up and slew the sleeping giant.

Dougal returned home and became a hero of the lands, as much for the recipe of this new drink, Atholl Brose, as for ending the terror.

The second origin tale takes place a couple decades prior to the turn of the century. The 16th century!

In 1475, John of Islay, chief of Clan Donald, Lord of the Isles, Earl of Ross, was leading a rebellion against King James III of Scotland, who in turn sent John Stewart, the 1st Earl of Atholl, to defeat this renegade. Scouting forays noticed that John’s men drank from a nearby well. The Earl sent the scouts back, under cover of darkness, with oats, honey, and Scotch whisky. The mixture turned the water into a wonderfully intoxicating drink, which in turn made the chieftain’s men too inebriated to fight. Thus, the Earl of Atholl was able to quell the rebellion with ease. Perhaps the Earl was Dougal’s descendant!

“Beanstalk Giant ,” Arthur Rackham, public domain

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“Beanstalk Giant ,” Arthur Rackham, public domain

John Stewart 1st Earl of Atholl

public domain

Keep in mind, this is a legend. The Lord of the Isles did lead a rebellion against the king and was defeated by the Earl of Atholl, but through brave fighting on both sides. As intriguing as this story is, we know the Scots can hold their whisky better than any old giant.
Now that the fun stuff is over, let’s get to the really fun stuff: making this nectar-like drink.

**Ingredients:**
- 750 ml bottle of Scotch whisky (preferably not on the peaty side)
- ½ pint heavy cream
- 1 pound honey
- 1 cup ground oatmeal
- Silver spoon (optional)

**Directions:**
- Mix whisky and oats and store, covered, for several hours in a cool place
- Strain until the oats are removed
- Stir in heavy cream
- Whisk in honey until smooth

That’s it! Very simple. The hardest ingredient to find may be the silver spoon traditionally used to stir everything with. I cheated and used electric beaters, and finished with my Guinness pouring spoon as a nod to the silver spoon.

When I attempted my first batch, I only had enough Scotch to make a quarter batch, which worked out well for me. It gave me an excuse to not only finish my Macallan 10 (so I have a reason to buy some Macallan 12!), but to also try the recipe with some Jameson Irish whiskey so I could taste for differences between the two. I appreciated both batches, as they were extremely smooth and easy on the palate. Of course the differences were pretty much just like the differences between Scotch and Irish whiskey. One just can’t go wrong with either of these liquors.

On a final note, some of the directions say to throw away the oats and some do not mention them again after the straining. They smell amazingly like whisky, and I hated the thought of that going to waste. I added some cream and heated it, hoping it would taste as good as it smelled. It did not. It may have been one of the worse things I have ever tasted, but I’m glad I took a bite. And then a second and a third to make sure it’s not an acquired taste. That, too, is not. I’ve posted a video of my reaction on my Facebook page, at: www.facebook.com/JamesSlavenWriter.
Annie looked to the east to see Mrs. Ian Breac hard at reading her Bible, rocking her black cat in her lap. Behind Annie was the endless ocean, black and silver now in the waning light. Above her shone a full moon, seeming to be a bit larger than normal. And below?

Below, ten or twenty feet, Annie saw a beautiful young woman asleep on the beach, wrapped tightly in a light blue tartan blanket.

“Annie.”

Annie was startled by the voice of Seamus and also by the realization that it was her own body that she was viewing below.

“Fear not,” her friend urged, as he held two fingers out to grasp the same two fingers of her hand. So often this was the only way they had to show their mutual admiration. It was a hug of souls, in lieu of a real hug. It was an entwining of their spirits, in lieu of a real entwinement. It was a kiss of energy, in lieu of a real kiss.

Still, Seamus could feel the life force travel back and forth between their fingers, whenever this happened, and he never wished to release her soft fingers, though he knew he always would be required to do so.

This time, however, he would not let go, but instead he bid Annie to follow him on a celestial journey.

“Come with me. It will be safe.”

Annie nodded, “Yes,” and the two souls began to chase the moon.

Upon arrival, Annie noticed that Seamus had set a table of food and drink along the banks of the Sea of Tranquility. As quiet as the night sky was, with Earth looking just as silent below, it was no wonder this place was named so.

The silence was broken only by an ancient, soft ethereal song, “Hello, You Are Beautiful, My Almost Love” - a song as old as love itself, a song of never-can-be, of late night tears and holes punched in clouds; a song of heartaches and bittersweet memories.

Seamus held Annie’s spirit against his own as they danced from star to star, the words reaching to the deepest level of their combined essence.

Finally, when emotions were untamable, and unbearable, they thankfully sat at the Wolf Moon table enjoying fine wine, roasted fowl, berries, roots and cheese, lots of cheese . . . cheese everywhere, it seemed.

“Will you come with me tonight on a spirit adventure?” Seamus pleaded.

“Have we not already done so?” Annie asked, surprised.
“Aye! But I mean a much bigger adventure. One that’ll rattle your prattle!”

“Seamus. You must promise I’ll be safe. If so, I will go, but not for long. I only have a half hour to spend with you. Then I must get back.”

“Get back to what?” Seamus retorted, “To a world asleep, to boredom and monotony? What better offer have you had than to feel your spirit fly to worlds yet unknown, to the new and adventurous, the ancient and sacred, the musical and sensual world I have invited you to visit?”

“Still, I must get back soon.”

“Aye. Then I will fly my spirit like a comet through the sky. I will spill my words of wonder as fast as I can. I will reveal and conceal in the same breath. I can speed no faster than this for you, though I will try.”

Straight up the two spirits soared until spotting a fairy sweeping the doorway of her asteroid-bound homestead.

Seamus stopped to ask briefly, “Are ye one of those fairies from a children’s story, then?”

“Aye, abandoned for preachin’ blasphemy at their tender, but longing ears. And what’s it to you? Who do ye be, anyway, and what are ye doin’ here?”

“I am Seamus of Clan Raven. This is my love . . . err, I mean my dear friend, Annie.”

When Annie was serious about something she often spoke with her face turned slightly away, but eyes fixed on Seamus. It was this look she gave him, all those years ago, when she said, quite frankly, “I am your Annie.”

Since that day, Seamus had been confused as to her true meaning. At best, she was his soul mate. At least, she was a friend who sorely needed her own friend at that moment and reached out to him, without really knowing what she was after.

Either way, Seamus was happy it happened. He loved her beyond life. He had told her so. He would stop an arrow for her. He would be buried beside her. He would build her a shrine, write her a book, play songs and recite poetry for her. He’d protect her come Hell or high water, no matter what it was she meant that day - that day she spoke, “I am your Annie.”

Now he would take her on her greatest adventure of all!

Turning to the fairy, Seamus remarked casually, “We are off to talk with God.”

“What?!” Annie and the fairy questioned simultaneously.

“Oh, don’t be alarmed, He, She, It will be glad to see me, and I hope to get answers to some things that have been bothering me.”

“You are a bother, for sure,” returned the fairy. She then very impolitely slammed the door to her little orbiting hut, leaving Seamus and Annie to face the cold, dark reaches of space, alone.

“Come, Annie. Don’t be afraid. It is but a spirit journey. You are safely asleep on the beach far below - and how would you feel if you should wake without first visiting Heaven?”

“Seamus. I often wonder about your sanity... about the paths you choose. In this case, I will follow, for the adventure sounds fascinating enough. But we must hurry, I only have so much time.

With that, the two were off again for parts unknown. As they traveled along, they passed other wayfarers - Heavenly hikers, Venetian vagabonds, a man who looked strangely like Rip Van Winkle or Robinson Crusoe, but who must have been a priest as he went by the name of Father Time.

Finally, after what seemed like a long split second, the two Celts found themselves at a set of large golden pillars that formed the gateway to the inner sanctum of Heaven.

Ah! pillars - built to represent the entrance to the womb of a mother, so that one can be born again - into Masonic secrets, ritualistic religious ceremonies, government bureaucracy, or even a collection of ancient museum artifacts.

Mankind had used this symbol for centuries, but now, here, even in Heaven, one was reminded of birth, life, and birth again, by the hand of a celestial stone mason.
An angelic guard stood at the gate blocking entrance for all except the holiest of the holies.

“I am Seamus of Clan Raven, and I am here to meet with God!”

The angel smiled wryly, then replied dryly, “No one gets in to see God. We have no openings, except perhaps for a craftsman.”

“Yes, yes. I am a craftsman. I am a singer and crafter of songs - a performing on many instruments.”

“We have enough of those already.”

“Then I am a writer of verse and history.”

“Too bad, we have a glut.”

Seamus thought aloud, timidly - “I am capable of refurbishing Heaven on a dime...?”

“Been done!”

Scratching his head, he dug deeper. “What of psychics and mediums?”

“Sir, you are asking to speak to the One who knows all. How silly you would seem.”

“Artist?”

“No.”

“Horse handler?”

“No”

“Bard, warrior-priest, technician?”

“No, no, and I don’t even know what that last one is!”

Seamus challenged, “Ask your God if he has one person, one craftsman who can do all of this, and more.”

“Yes. You have a point. Perhaps he will speak to you. Come in and find a place in line.”

“What of my friend?”

“Annie? Why she is so beautiful, no one could ever deny her anything. Step this way, mi’lady.”

“Ah,” sighed Seamus, “The way of the world..”

Annie and Seamus approached God’s house – a large crystal-like structure surrounded by those waiting to speak with Him.

There stood a Rabbi craving a ham sandwich, followed by a minister hiding his whiskey ‘neath his cloak. An Amish man used a mill wheel to start his horse, while a Charismatic raced a Holy Roller down the isle. Proselytizers traded notes on how to remove the dent from their foreheads, placed there by angry home dwellers telling them, “Get the hell off my porch!” Yes, even Spiritualists, Methodists, and a token Atheist all waited their turn.

Suddenly, a window burst open and a voice announced, “The Lord God Almighty will not be available for audiences or incidents, today!”

The sad pilgrims, looking quite rejected, began their long journey home – but not Seamus.

“You’ll be tellin’ God that Seamus of Clan Raven is here to see him . . . to question him.”

“You question God? What questions could you possibly have for him?”

“Aye, and here’s my first one - Why would you take me mother, so violently, she being on her way to church and all, and just returnin’ a stray lamb to the fold, first?

- “And another. Why, when me own father fought with your cross on his shield, did ye let him fall to the likes of a cowardly Saxon?

- “And further, when me sister and her children ran from the Norman sword, fell to their knees and prayed for your salvation . . why did that salvation come at the edge of a vengeful blade?

- “I’ll not ask ye about clan members who starved to death, those who came down with consumption at harvest time . . and died in the fields, or those who prayed for peace, for prosperity . . and died as slain beggars at the hands of evil men. Or, about the baby what died in me own hands.

- “But I will ask one more thing. Why is it I must see and covet Annie, each day, and yet with no’ a chance to ever have her for my own, though I’ve prayed and prayed for it?”

Seamus’ voice swelled with sad anger - “Will ye be answerin’ my questions, then? Can ye? Can ye even answer me one damn question, Lord Almighty God? I demand an answer. I will not leave until I am told what I cannnae understand on me own.”
Annie tugged at Seamus’ shirt to let it be. “Let it be,” – always the easy answer he thought. “Why should I or anyone let it be?”

He did not acknowledge her concern, for his concern about God was much greater. Finally, in his loudest Highland voice he cried, “Dammit, God...answer me!”

Suddenly, a door opened in the side of the crystal compartment. A white light shone a pathway inside, and Seamus moved quickly toward the opening.

“Seamus! Be careful.”

“Come with me, Annie.”

Annie reluctantly took her friend’s hand and entered the mysterious crystal cavern. She thought it being just a dream, and she safe on the beach asleep, what could it hurt to follow?

The inside of the crystal was filled with a pure white mist, clouding anything to be seen. A voice spoke out to Seamus, “Tell me Seamus, do not your Catholics and Protestants fight each other in Ireland, committing terrible atrocities in my name? In the Holy Land, when you were a Crusader, did you not see Muslims, Jews and fellow Christians at each other’s throat, again in my name? Your holy men hold their hands out in greed to collect gold that I nor the poor will ever see. The lost of your societies blame me for their weaknesses. Your soldiers, on each side of the conflict, invoke my name. I am not even allowed to enjoy a simple game without claims by one side or another that ‘God is on our side,’ and yet you dare question me? I will reveal myself to you as I have to very few and then you will see wherein the problem lies.”

With that, the mist receded and Seamus and Annie found themselves standing in the midst of several angled mirrors, each reflecting their images into another, in an endless, infinite visual of only them.

“Where are you?” Seamus demanded.

“You are looking at me.”

“All we see is ourselves infinitely reflected.”

“Exactly! For you see, you are me...you are God...humankind – are responsible for it all. You have been given so much by your Mother Earth. You squander, destroy, kill in my name (or the devil’s). You scheme, defraud, lie, cheat and steal, and wonder where I am failing. I am you, you are me. If you fail, we fail. For the greatest commandment after “Love your neighbor as yourself” is “God helps him (or her) who helps themselves.”

“Do not look to Heaven and pray for deliverance. As Jesus told you, ‘The kingdom of God is within you.’ Do not curse me when you fail. Look inside yourself, where I dwell, and find your own failure... or success. Look inside me, where you dwell, and find your own answer. Wait for the answer. Accept the answer. Then you will find the peace you seek.”

“Go now, with the knowledge that you, yourself, are God, as am I, as is your friend, Annie. Nothing can hold you back, stifle your muses, break your heart, or make you fail, once you realize there is No Blame to Cast... Only a Flame to Last.”

With a sudden jerk, Annie found herself back inside her warm body, on the beach, below the churchyard, and below a shining moon. For a moment she thought she saw a flicker, as if from the edge of a jeweled wine goblet.

No. She must just have been dreaming.
EDITOR’S NOTE: We have another great musical guest interview this month. Jillian LaDage blends Celtic and Middle Eastern music together in a self-produced CD sure to be enjoyed by many.

CG: Welcome to the pages of Celtic Guide. You have such an interesting sound, blending two seemingly disparate styles of music. Can you tell us a little bit about your background – where you are from, your instrumentation, and why you chose to blend these two styles together in your music?

JL: Thank you for the warm welcome! My foray into music at first had nothing to do with my heritage which is both Irish and Scottish by way of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where some distant ancestors first landed ashore in North America. Music chose me and not the other way around. As if it was always in my blood and there could be no other outcome.

I only had initial dreams of becoming an actress or an elementary school teacher.

Growing up on a dairy farm in rural Illinois I honed my skills at listening with my love for music, through the silent nights and quiet days, hearing rock such as Van Halen in my Dad’s barn, and Amy Grant and Rich Mullins in my Mother’s kitchen, while whiling away the time tackling the never ending dishes that come with a large family.

I did not grow up with traditional music at all. My first experience of it did not come until I was well into my teen years. It came through my first voice teacher and her husband who performed as a traditional Irish duo on harp and Uillean Pipes. If I took the normal journey, one would assume from that I would have fallen in love and delved straight into Celtic music from there. After all it was in my blood. Of course being me, I did not. I didn’t fully embrace Celtic music and the writing of it until I was in my mid-twenties. And from there I ended up accidentally learning to play the harp!
My journey into Celtic music was not initially about the Celts themselves, but about finding myself, my heritage. I had struggled for many years trying to find where my voice fit in as a singer and feeling out of place with some of the more unusual qualities of it that did not seem to lend itself so easily to popular music. It was in Celtic music that I found I had a voice and need do nothing to change it. From there I started looking further into these people we call “The Celts.”

Their wanderings, communities, art . . . wherever I could find mention of them I followed. In doing so I found them settling, traveling across the Middle East and Mediterranean, sacking Rome, hiring out as mercenaries in Turkey, creating a community within these communities they had entered into and leaving their mark long after they were gone.

It does seem at first that Celtic and Middle Eastern music stylistically are opposite ends of the spectrum. However, it seemed only natural to me that what we term Celtic music should encompass the musical styles of these places as well, for what traveler has ever left a place unchanged? And so I at first imagined that had been so in their case as well and then sought it in history, literature, legends. I looked to bridge the distance between the past and present both in my research for a song and in the instrumentation I choose and compose for it, fusing elements of eastern music with the west.

**CG: Who are your greatest Celtic and Middle Eastern musical influences?**

**JL:** While some of the strongest influences on my music and writing have been Loreena McKennitt, Newfoundland group Great Big Sea, Karan Casey, Mary Jane Lamond, and Persian Music Master Kayhan Kalhor I equally find inspiration through the works of Rumi, the Irish Mystic John O’Donohue, mythology, ancient history, The Silk Road.

These days I tend to listen to a tremendous amount of Classical music via my local NPR station, and at the same time I am currently enamored with Alan Doyle’s album *So Let’s Go* and Rupa & The April Fishes’ *Oval.*

**CG: Are the Celtic and/or Middle Eastern cultures strong in your area?**

**JL:** While living in Minnesota I have been pleased to find there is a very strong Middle Eastern community that seems to be growing especially in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul). Where I live, in Northern Minnesota, (Moorhead) there is a community, but it is much quieter; you could almost say underground and untapped.

And at the same time we are seeing more Middle Eastern restaurants opening, cultural celebrations and with that, whenever you have an influx from another culture, you see the benefits in wisdom and enrichment it brings to the community. It is my hope we will continue to see more of this and the embracing of other cultures.

As far as the Celtic Culture in my area I am not aware of one. I sometimes jokingly say I feel as if I am one of five people of Scottish/Irish descent living in a predominately Norwegian/Swedish area. I have learned what *Lefse* is and how to make it in my time here, though. And anyone who has done this knows how time consuming it is!

It’s to the point now that since living here for five years, I get very excited when I meet someone with Celtic heritage and know I have found kinship; someone who shares the same sense of humour.

**CG: Where are some of the more exciting places your live performances have taken you?**

**JL:** Touring has been off the cards for some time and now for the foreseeable future as I have recently been diagnosed with Lymes Disease and Hashimoto’s Disease, which wouldn’t at first seem like a blessing, but it is. Through much of my childhood I was often very ill (with many misdiagnoses) missing months of
school, activities, and opportunities. Dealing with these illnesses even now as an adult has made me look at many different ways of being a musician and business owner. There are so many new opportunities afforded us now in this New Music Industry than there was when I first started out.

Taking my music business completely online was out of necessity for me and my health as well as to keep creating and bringing the music to my fans. Growing a community around the music online and staying in touch through email is of utmost priority at this stage of my career.

Of course, I do get asked all time when my next tour will be with many requests to do a full scale European tour. The demand has to be there before I even begin contemplating something on that scale, as it is no small undertaking especially in today’s ever changing music climate. I will of course tour again one day if demand is there to justify and support it. On the top of my list are performances at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh and The Alhambra (in Spain).

CG: What is the craziest thing you’ve done as a musician?

JL: I once carried my 50lb Troubadour Harp up over five flights of stairs! It was for the photo shoot for my debut album, The Ancestry, which also saw my photographer Nancy Merkling hanging almost all the way out of the window of an 1800s mansion just to capture the shot. I don’t think I’ll do that again...but never say never.

CG: Do you have song downloads available, or performance dates coming up that you’d like our readers to know about?

JL: My Winter Seasonal album, Enchanted Winter, is currently available as a limited edition CD or digital download through CelticJillianMusic.com

The CD is encased in hand-drawn artwork of an enchanted Celtic forest and comes with a bonus downloadable coloring sheet.

Capturing the enchantment of an ancient winter’s night, it was recorded in a minimal setting to transport listeners a thousand years back... through nine seasonal pieces alongside new original works...the medieval strains of Sir Walter Scott’s, Christmas In The Olden Time, set in haunting tones to the new traditional inspired lament, Come Winter Ground, inspired by the beauty and change of seasons from Autumn to Winter in the night sky, into the Middle Eastern rhythms of Bergamask Dance.

Also available is my debut album, The Ancestry and my latest single released this summer, “An Samhradh (St.John’s Eve).”
All three of these works can be purchased on CelticJillianMusic.com, and also on itunes. For a limited time I am offering 2 free songs http://freedownload.celticworldmusic.com/JL

CG: What is the one thing you’d like our Celtic Guide readers to know about Jillian LaDage?

JL: I am just an independent artist from Illinois with big dreams...creating a musical journey into another world.

CG: How can your fans keep in touch with you online?

JL: I am on Facebook a lot and I find it’s a great place to connect with people all over the world. Plus, I have thousands of other like-minded ancient history, Celtic-Mid East infused -literature-myth music lovers there! Facebook.com/JillianLaDage You can also find me at: Youtube.com/JillianLaDageMusic (don’t forget to subscribe!) Instagram.com/jillian_ladage Twitter @JillianLaDage My Website: JillianLaDage.com

CG: Thank you, so much for participating in this issue of the Celtic Guide.

JL: Thank you for the opportunity to be apart of the Celtic Guide, I have so enjoyed this time.

Lots of “gear” involved in a live performance!
Here’s Obie in December of last year along the banks of the River Lee, Co Cork, with friends Tarabh and Beag. Yes it does occasionally snow in Ireland. Typical winter weather in Ireland consists of clouds and rain with the occasional sunny spell. The mountains may have snow on them for many weeks in winter, but snowfalls on the lower ground are few, and snow is generally not a feature of the Irish climate. Temperatures hover around a January average of 5°C, or 40°F.

As a small island downwind of a large ocean, the climate of Ireland is profoundly impacted by that ocean. The North Atlantic Current moves heat northwards, which is then carried by the prevailing winds towards Ireland. This leads to Dublin being 4 °C warmer than Seattle on the west coast of America, in spite of Dublin being further north by 6°, and both cities having a maritime climate.
EDITOR’S NOTE: Ancient Celtic cultures around the world have long been identified by their jewelry, with its unique designs. For our “Gifts” issue, we decided to interview a modern-day Celtic artisan, Virginia Murphy, whose company, Ethereal Ideal, produces high-end handmade items often featuring Celtic designs.

CG: Welcome to the pages of Celtic Guide. I know you describe your work as “Bohemian,” but you also feature your Celtic inclinations quite often. What made you decide to choose this particular art style for your jewelry collection?

EI: I cultivated the Celtic Bohemian style of my jewelry through the gradual development of my own aesthetic. Growing up, I was an avid reader, often reading over 20 books a month, ranging from epic fantasy to medieval history, with my favorite novels focusing on characters or myths with Celtic heritage.

I would imagine how beautiful the characters must have looked in their garb and doodle designs in the margins of the books. These little doodles became the first iterations of my style and aesthetic, and have grown into the pieces you see today. My designs recall that fantastic heritage by including Celtic knots, interlocking loops, and the color pallet of the Celtic homeland’s countryside in my work. Some of my pieces pay homage to these ideas in name as well.
CG: Where did the name Ethereal Ideal come from?

EI: When I first began my business, I was at a loss on how to describe what I was striving for. My business grew organically as an extension of my own interests, and I wanted to create beautiful accessories that harkened back to an ideal of timeless beauty from our cultural past. That ideal is a fleeting thing, as whims and cultural preferences shift, but elegance is timeless, so that is what I strive for. After researching a variety of designers, I realized that no one out there does this craft quite like I do. My style and construction set me apart in that the pieces are very lightweight and graceful, almost floating on one’s hair instead of weighing it down, the pieces being delicate in appearance, but deceptively strong in construction. I hope that my pieces are able to capture some of that Ethereal Ideal I have had in my head for so long.

CG: Do you have Celtic roots yourself?

EI: My Celtic roots, like most Americans, are shared with a myriad of other influences. My family hails from Louisiana, a great mixing bowl for immigrant cultures. I can claim Scotch-Irish, French, German and Native American heritage. While the area is most famous for its French influence, migrant workers brought over from the British Isles to the lowlands of the New World brought their Celtic myths and superstitions with them as well. Their effects are still visible in the region today, and have always interested me. Seeing festivals, parades, holiday celebrations, and a myriad of other community events growing up inspired my love of cultural exploration, and introduced me to the fantastic world of the Celts. My interests were fueled by my reading, and have continued to this day. I actively participate in many Celtic-themed events in my current residing state of Virginia.

CG: I see your mainstay is the headpiece or crown jewelry. Again, what convinced you that this was the right area of concentration for your artistry?

EI: I have always loved the idea of the crown. Not only the significance of ceremonial wearing, but also just the visual of adorning the top of one’s head with a beautifully crafted object for everyday use. Everyone deserves to feel beautiful, and true beauty starts within the mind, so why not mark the beauty inside with something on the outside!

The first headpiece I ever made was for my own wedding, and I loved making it. I enjoyed the physical act of constructing it, but also the spiritual aspect of adorning the center of my being with something I crafted with love and
intent to mark such a significant day in my life. It was a traditional flower crown made with wire and glue, but I embellished it by including pearl beads that draped down the back. I even made my own veil that extended to the ground and would blow in the breeze.

I fell in love with the romance of the look, as did many others. Within a few months, I was asked to make a crown for my sister’s wedding, and then another friend’s, then another, and so on. One day a friend showed me some trendy hair jewelry that reminded them of a crown I had made with one major difference: it was made out of metal chain. She said, “I love this design, but I wish it wouldn’t snag my hair.”

Anyone who has spent time growing their hair long knows this struggle. I analyzed the crown closely and realized that by using leaf ribbon and DMC embroidery floss, I can make my own unique accessories that would also not harm your hair while still remaining strong enough for daily wear. These have proven to be my most popular items, but are not the only crafts I make. I also make bracelets, chokers, earrings, journals, and anything else that strikes my fancy!

**CG:** What is the most extravagant project you’ve ever created?

**EI:** The most extravagant project I ever created was made difficult due to quantity, not complexity. I made 100 crowns in less than two weeks for the Made By Mermaids Tail Mail, a monthly mailer for people to try handcrafted fashion accessories. My average order turnaround time for one crown is within 2 days, but for this project I pushed myself to make at least 7 a day until they were complete.

**CG:** According to your website, a number of photographers have used your hair jewelry on their models during photo shoots. This must give you a great sense of pride, yes?

**EI:** I love that my work has been worn in photo shoots, at weddings, renaissance fairs and for dance costumes. Women of all ages have worn my pieces to all kinds of events, and it always puts a smile on my face to spot a customer out in the world with one of my pieces on. It makes me so happy that others find beauty in what I do. Currently I work with Kevin Murphy Photography on my own independent projects. The photos we have created in the past year reflect our combined style and technique, and have been published both in print and online.

**CG: Why is your hair jewelry different than the typical choices available elsewhere?**

**EI:** What sets the pieces from Ethereal Ideal apart from other jewelry offerings is their construction and aesthetic. The non-snag fiber based construction is lightweight, easy to style, and adds a unique accent to your look. The designs are simple to customize and can be adapted to go with most any ensemble. The aesthetic is also timeless and classy. At any event, no one will have jewelry quite like this.

**CG:** Where can examples be seen, and orders be placed?

**EI:** My products are available for sale on both Amazon Handmade and Etsy. To learn about my process and see what I’m up to, check out Ethereal Ideal on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr @ethereal_ideal. Everything I do can also be found on www.etherealideal.com.

**CG:** What is the one thing you’d like Celtic Guide readers to know about Ethereal Ideal?

In the world of hair jewelry and Celtic design, Ethereal Ideal is unique. The hand-crafted pieces are individually crocheted to adorn the wearer and accent their inner beauty. My hope is that each person wearing my jewelry feels adored.

**CG:** Thank you, so much, for participating in the “Gifts” issue of Celtic Guide.

**EI:** Thank you for having me.

[www.etherealideal.com](http://www.etherealideal.com) for more examples of Virginia’s artistry.
EDITOR’S NOTE: The following is an excerpt from *Celtic Lightning: How the Scots and the Irish Created a Canadian Nation* (HarperCollins Canada, 2015), written by Ken McGoogan and available on Amazon.com. Ken shares a tale with us, this issue, about an early feminist who stood up to everyone, including Queen Elizabeth. Her name was Gracie O’Malley, a dreaded female pirate along the coast of Ireland.

Off the south coast of Ireland, in choppy seas, we sailed around Skellig Michael, a rocky island that rises, volcano-like, seven hundred feet into the air. We marvelled to think that, for centuries, Christian monks lived in beehive meditation huts near the top, and would reach them in the wind by clambering out of their coracles and climbing six hundred stone steps, narrow, steep, and often wet. We were circumnavigating Ireland with Adventure Canada, Sheena and I, going ashore once or twice a day in Zodiacs. Off the west coast, on Inishmore in the Aran Islands, where children learn Gaelic as their first language, we debarked and followed a rugged footpath uphill to Dun Aengus, a ritual site from the Bronze Age. Here one of us determined that, yes, we could terrify ourselves by lying on our stomachs, crawling to the edge, and looking straight down to where, a hundred metres below, white waves smashed into the black rock face.

But the most evocative moment of the circumnavigation of Ireland came on Inishbofin, which is located north up the west coast, off Connemara.

As we rode from our ship to the dock at Inishbofin, eight or nine people to a Zodiac, we passed Dun Grainne, the remains of a fortress used by the legendary Pirate Queen “Grainne” or Grace O’Malley.
used in the 1500s by the legendary Pirate Queen “Grainne” or Grace O’Malley. Born into a powerful west-coast family, O’Malley rejected the traditional roles available to females. She became a skilled sailor, gained control of a merchant fleet, and conducted trade as far away as Africa. Her enemies denounced her as “the most notorious sea captain in Ireland,” and complained that she “overstepped the part of womanhood.”

The Celtic tradition that produced O’Malley—that of the dauntless woman, latterly known as feminism—has never been short of exemplars. Besides the Irish Pirate Queen and the Scottish Flora MacDonald, saviour of Bonnie Prince Charlie, there was Maria Edgeworth, who has been called the Irish Jane Austen. She kicked down doors through the early 1800s. And later that century, after seeing Irish tenants evicted from their lands, the activist-actress Maud Gonne inspired William Butler Yeats and thousands of Irish nationalists.

In Scotland, the first champion of Scottish independence to be elected to the British House of Commons was a woman, Winifred Ewing, leader of the Scottish National Party.

Five years later, in 1972, and in that same hallowed house, a twenty-year-old Irish MP, Bernadette Devlin, delivered “a slap heard round the world” when the Home Secretary claimed that on Bloody Sunday, British troops had shot more than two dozen unarmed protestors in self-defence. Having witnessed the massacre – 13 died that day, and one later -- Devlin crossed the floor and slapped his face.

In this unbroken Celtic tradition of “overstepping women,” which extends backwards to Saint Brigid of Kildare (451–525) and forward to its flowering in the contemporary world, Grace O’Malley came early. In June of 1593, as she sailed up the River Thames to meet Queen Elizabeth I, she would have known little about what her privateering English counterparts were doing. Walter Raleigh was organizing an expedition to discover the Lost City of Gold in South America. Martin Frobisher, having conducted three expeditions to North America, was plundering ships off the coasts of France and Spain. Francis Drake, circumnavigator of the world, was ranging around North Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, seizing booty wherever he found it.

This bronze statue of Grace O’Malley, by artist Michael Cooper, is located at Westport House.

Grace O’Malley, commander of a fleet of galleys and several hundred sailors, had sailed from the west coast of Ireland to seek the removal of the ruthless Richard Bingham, the English-appointed governor of Connaught. Bingham was the one who had denounced her as “a woman who overstepped the part of womanhood,” and labelled her “the most notorious sea captain in Ireland.”

She sought the release from Bingham’s jail of a half-brother and of her son, Tibbot. Also, she hoped to secure the right to maintain herself “by land and sea,” by which she meant forcibly collecting “tax” from any ships that plied the waters she patrolled. The merchants of Galway were allowed to do this: why was she prevented?

Earlier in the year, Grace had written to Elizabeth requesting a meeting. She spoke little English, and knew that the Queen spoke no Irish,
so had communicated in Latin. As a descendant of Irish nobility, the privileged daughter of a prominent chieftain, she had learned the language as a child, probably from a priest. Intrigued, Elizabeth had responded, through her ministers, with the Eighteen Articles of Interrogation. Several of these focused on antecedents and familial relations, but others sought information about who owned what lands and how the Irish Brehon law treated wives and widows, a subject Grace had raised: how were widows to survive after their husbands died?

Ancient Brehon laws were more egalitarian and democratic than the English common law. Under the Irish system, administered by Brehons or itinerant judges, a ruler would not only be elected, but could be male or female. He or she could also be voted out of office and replaced. In the mid-1600s, Oliver Cromwell would put an end to all that.

But now, in her early sixties, Grace O’Malley wrote that Bingham had been persecuting her since 1586. He had hanged one of her sons, who had been faithful to Her Majesty, and had jailed Grace herself. He had built a gallows from which to hang her, but had released her after receiving a pledge from a powerful ally.

When Bingham briefly left the country, she had secured a pardon from the English governor in Dublin, and then retreated to her stronghold, Rockfleet Castle. But Bingham had taken almost all her cattle and horses, and had also seized most of her ships. He had driven her into poverty. Surely Queen Elizabeth, a powerful woman of almost precisely her own age, would lend a sympathetic ear?

Grace O’Malley was born at Belclare Castle near Westport around 1530. During her lifetime, King Henry VIII of England had begun the Tudor conquest of Ireland. This had led, under his daughter Queen Elizabeth, to the Nine Years War, the Flight of the Earls, and the Plantation of Ulster. During Grace’s youth, her elders escaped the worst depredations of the England-based Tudors. A seafaring clan, the O’Malleys controlled the waters off the west coast of Ireland. They taxed and plundered those who came within reach, and also conducted raids in foreign lands.

As a girl, when her father refused her permission to join him in a Spanish expedition, ostensibly because her long hair would get caught in the ropes, she chopped off her hair and changed into male clothing. This incident inspired her nickname, Grainne, which means “crop-haired.” It also convinced her father to teach her to sail. Still, she was a female. And when she was sixteen he gave her a substantial dowry in cattle, horses, sheep, and ships, and married her off to Donal O’Flaherty, the warrior son of a clan chieftain.

With “Donal of the Battles,” as he was called, she would have two sons and a daughter. While Donal engaged in feuding on land, notably against the neighbouring Joyces, Grace combined her own vessels with those of the O’Flahertys to create a growing fleet of well-armed ships. With this fleet, she controlled shipping lanes to the west-coast port of Galway. She practised a type of piracy she euphemistically called “maintenance by land and sea.” Captains of merchant vessels would either pay her a toll for safe passage or she would seize their ships and add them to her fleet.

When Grace was in her early thirties, she lost her marauding husband to an ambush. The rugged O’Flahertys laughed at her demands under Brehon law and installed a new chieftain. Grace returned to her father’s lands, bent on reasserting her primacy at sea. With her she brought some two hundred sailors who chose to remain with her—not just O’Flahertys but also scores of elite “gallowglass” mercenaries, Norse-Gaelic warriors from Scotland and northern Ireland.

As Judith Cook writes in her biography, *Pirate Queen*, “there was no precedent for what she achieved as a woman in a man’s world.” That so many men followed Grace O’Malley at this juncture “is almost beyond belief. That she retained their continuing loyalty . . . suggests that she had a truly charismatic personality. But even that would have been insufficient had she not
earned their respect by proving herself a master mariner, a brilliant strategist, and, above all, successful.”

Now, while based at Clare Island in Clew Bay, due west of Westport, Grace O’Malley became known as the Pirate Queen. She commanded several hundred fighting men and reigned supreme over the coastal waters. Because she frequently visited Scotland, especially Kintyre and the southern Hebrides, and sailed also into ports along the northern coast of Ireland, O’Malley was well aware that Elizabeth I, queen of England since 1558, had begun a campaign to force English law on Ireland. Grace needed a powerful alliance and so took a second husband, “Iron Richard” Bourke, who was likely to become a clan chieftain: the MacWilliam.

Legend has it that when she was in her mid-thirties, she turned up at his stronghold, Rockfleet Castle, and proposed a trial marriage. After one year, if it did not work out, either partner could withdraw. A corollary legend, one that highlights her bravado, finds Grace locking herself in the castle after a year and a day. When Iron Richard arrives home, she calls down from the battlements: “Richard Bourke, I dismiss you.”

In fact, the two remained allies until his death two decades later. In 1567, Grace gave birth to his son, Tibbot. Again according to legend, she did so while leading a trading mission to the Middle East. A day after she gave birth, off the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, Grace was resting below decks when her ship was attacked by pirates. Fighting raged until one of her men appeared and told her they were being boarded.

Grace leapt out of her bunk, pulled a blanket around herself, and grabbed a pair of blunderbusses. She emerged on deck playing the madwoman, dancing and capering. As the invading officers stood gaping, she pulled out her muskets and blasted away. She killed all the leaders, told her men to seize their followers, and sailed home to hang the lot at Rockfleet.

In 1571, her husband, Iron Richard, became tánaiste or second-in-command to the MacWilliam. Not long afterwards, the English began exerting control over the western counties. They were taking direct aim at the Irish system of communal land tenure. Sir Henry Sidney, the English lord deputy, was inducing the Irish chieftains to surrender their lands, to take them back under the queen’s authority, and then to rule according to English law. Grace O’Malley opposed this because it would disinherit her husband. But she was sly. When Henry Sidney visited Galway, she sailed into the harbour with three galleys and two hundred fighting men. She pledged allegiance to Queen Elizabeth, gave Sidney a boat tour of the harbour (for a price), and, when he was gone, resumed her old ways.

Weeks after Sidney departed, the Pirate Queen made a miscalculation. She sailed south and began raiding the estates of the Earl of Desmond. She was captured by Desmond’s men and spent the next two years in jail—first in Limerick, then in Dublin Castle. Early in 1579, Grace O’Malley regained her freedom, possibly in exchange for information regarding Spain’s plans to use Ireland as a stepping stone to invade England. Four years later, after her husband died of natural causes, she claimed one-third of his estates and retreated to Rockfleet Castle with hundreds of retainers and a thousand head of cattle and horses.

At age fifty-three, with a ferocious army, a hard-to-reach castle, and a fleet of ships, Grace O’Malley looked set to sail blithely into the future. She did not anticipate the appointment, in 1584, of Sir Richard Bingham as English governor of Connaught. Probably, as Anne Chambers suggests in Ireland’s Pirate Queen, Bingham was “no more cruel than his contemporaries.” The brutal methods he used to subdue western Ireland were “the accepted rules of sixteenth-century warfare,” she writes, though they were “reinforced by his own racist attitudes towards the Irish in general.”

Unlike his conciliatory predecessor, Henry Sidney, Bingham believed in colonization by the sword. Born in Dorset, trained in military service from his youth, he took a hard line with Irish clan leaders who resisted English incursions. He detested Grace O’Malley, who in his view had no right, as a widow, to the estates she controlled, and still less right, as a woman, to rule.

Soon after being appointed, he introduced the Composition of Connaught, a complex document that asserted English control, preempting Gaelic law and custom, abolishing tributes paid to Irish chieftains, and fixing land rents payable to the English crown. It abolished this Irish business of the MacWilliamship, ending Grace’s dream of
bequeathing that legacy to her son Tibbot, now eighteen. As a precaution against Grace, Bingham captured Tibbot and sent him to England as a hostage to his brother, George Bingham.

In the face of such aggression, former enemies created alliances, and these Bingham quashed ruthlessly. He executed hostages and murdered Grace’s oldest son, Owen. He promised Grace O’Malley safe conduct to Rockfleet Castle, but when she set out with a few men and cows, he ambushed her and took her prisoner.

Bingham built a special gallows from which to hang the Pirate Queen. He denounced her as a “drawer in of Scots” and insisted that she had been “nurse to all rebellions in the province for forty years.” At the last moment—almost incredibly, given that he had killed so many without a second thought—Bingham let her go. Legend has it that, just as Grace O’Malley was about to climb onto the gallows, or in some versions when she was standing with a rope around her neck, a messenger arrived on horseback bearing a royal warrant for her release.

Grace O’Malley sailed north to Ulster to raise Scottish forces. Her galleys were damaged in a gale and needed repairs. As a result, she spent three months visiting with the Great O’Neill and the O’Donnell, leaving them in no doubt as to what they might expect when the English turned their attention to Ulster. In May 1587, Queen Elizabeth ordered Bingham to lead a force in Flanders. While he was in France, Grace made her way to Dublin Castle, and there secured an official pardon for both herself and her remaining sons.

When Bingham returned to Ireland, he seized much of her property, enforced an embargo, and resumed making life difficult for all of the Irish. Early in 1593, Grace O’Malley sent a letter to Queen Elizabeth, complaining of Bingham. She outlined her personal history, highlighting her two marriages. She noted that the Composition of Connaught neglected to make provision for the widows of chieftains, and asked the Queen “to grant her some reasonable maintenance for the little time she has to live.”

Grace O’Malley offered to submit to “surrender and regrant.” The Tudors used this legal mechanism to establish control over Irish clans, who owned their lands collectively as extended families under an ancient system of Brehon law. Those clans surrendered their holdings and were regranted control under the English common law. In a clever attempt to circumvent Bingham’s embargo, Grace O’Malley also sought permission “to invade with sword and fire all your highness’s enemies wheresoever they are or shall be . . . without any interruption of any person or persons whatsoever.” Soon after she sent this petition, she learned that Bingham had arrested Tibbot and charged him with treason on the grounds, probably justified, that he had conspired with the Great O’Neill to repel English expansion.

With Tibbot’s life in the balance, and without waiting for an answer to her petition, Grace O’Malley gathered a few of her more prestigious allies and sailed for London. That she met and had an audience with Queen Elizabeth is well documented. But the details of the meeting of these two women, both in their early sixties, are lost. Probably they met at Greenwich Palace, and certainly they conversed in Latin, the only language both spoke well.

With this visit, Grace O’Malley achieved a spectacular success. She waited, anchored in the Thames among ships from around the world, while Queen Elizabeth followed court protocol and received a reply from Richard Bingham. He responded furiously but to no effect.

Towards the end of September, Queen Elizabeth ordered him to release Tibbot. She wrote that because Grace had become a widow without livelihood, Bingham should provide for her out of her sons’ estates.

Elizabeth urged him, further, “to have pity for the poor aged woman” who had visited, noting that she “departs with great thankfulness and with many more earnest promises that she will, as long as she lives, continue a dutiful subject, yea and will employ all her power to offend and prosecute any offender against us.”

Back at Rockfleet Castle, Grace O’Malley built three massive new galleys and, as she neared seventy, set about plying her old trade of “maintenance by land and sea.” She lives on today not just in novels, biographies, plays, concert pieces, dances, and movies, and not just in the statues erected at Westport House, but in the “overstepping” audacity of countless contemporary women around the world.
The northernmost mainland region of Scotland is Caithness, and the eldest clan inhabiting this district are the MacKays, or the Siol Mhorgan. Indeed, the oldest surviving clan anywhere in the northern Highlands may well be the MacKay (always pronounced, historically, to end in the long-I vowel sound), most historians and clan archivists holding firm that they, like the Rosses and the Munroes, arrived from Ireland in the 12th century, after the Scottish King, William the Lion, had defeated Harald, the Norse Earl, or “Jarl,” of Orkney and Caithness.

Others, basing their opinions on resemblances found in heraldry and armorial bearings, count the Clan MacKay rather to be a branch of the medieval House of Forbes, but this is generally thought highly improbable; if having any such offshoot relation, more likely would it be the founders arose from the ancient House of Moray, rumored to be the last of the Pictish nobility. This latter origin also dovetails better from a cultural perspective, as the MacKays certainly possess most of the burly attributes that epitomize a Highland way of life.

Despite their descent from the earliest Celtic tribes of the region, though, proximity to their Norse neighbors almost certainly assures that the clan was quite blended in its ethnicity. As well, there were always many persons of the surname Morgan and Morganach who populated the households of the MacKays, despite the name sounding so natively Welsh, or somehow Cambrian in origin. How it came to be so thoroughly connected to this clan is difficult now to decipher. Regardless of the exact details, the clan seldom if ever hesitated to leave their mark in mail and mayhem, against their avaricious neighbors, whether Gunn or Sinclair, Sutherland or Ross.

A great, brooding warrior named Alexander is said to have been the first of the family, aiding in the great push to expel the troublesome Danes. His son, Walter, chamberlain to Adam, Bishop of Caithness, married that prelate’s daughter, and had a son, Martin, whose son, Magnus, is well remembered as a champion of Robert the Bruce, having fought under his direct command at Bannockburn. Magnus’ son Morgan is reckoned as the clan’s first chief.

It was from Morgan, the son of Magnus, that the clan took its appellation of Siol Mhorgain, “the race (or more accurately, the seeds) of Morgan.” Donald, the son of Morgan, married the daughter of MacNeil of Gigha on the Kintyre and
coast, and from the son of this pair, named Aodh (pronounced like the English pronoun “I”, and sometimes rendered simply with a Gaelic spelling “Y”), that the clan arrived at its surname of MacAodh, which was later written as “MacKay.”

The names of Macie and MacGhie are also said to be derived from MacKay. The family of MaGhie of Balmaghie, which for 600 years held estates in Galloway, used the same arms as the chief of the MacKays, Balmaghie being said to mean “MacKay town.” The doughty family line of MacPhail also claims long, deep kinship, and in times of war and raid, often rallied to the MacKay banner.

The clan rapidly became very powerful, and from an early date was engaged in feuds with its neighbors. Donald Mackaoi, that same chief from whom the Clan acquired their patronymic of MacKay, was killed, along with his own son, in the castle of Dingwall, by the turncoat William, Earl of Sutherland, in 1395. Only a few years later, in the course of a family quarrel with the MacLeods of Lewis, a bloody, raging battle was fought in Strathoykell, far out upon the marches of Ross, from which, it is said, only a single, solitary Lewis man escaped, grievously wounded, to tell the tale back home upon his native isle.

Ultimately, though, the MacKays proved too few to enact a final revenge for the crimes in Dingwall, and a reconciliation took place between Robert, the next Sutherland earl, and Angus MacKay, the eldest of Donald’s surviving sons; the other two being known as Houcheon Dubh, and Neill; Angus, the elder son, married a sister of Malcolm MacLeod of Lewis, creating a tenuous truce between the clans, and she bore him two sons, Angus Dubh, that is, “dark-complexioned,” and Roderick Gald, or “Lowland.”

On their father’s death, their uncle, Houcheon Dubh, became their tutor, and oversaw the management of their lands, protecting their boundaries with fire and sword as was necessary. As example, from an axiom of those days, is recalled this stern MacKay warning: “Watch ye well yer bornes bye middens, for whar Rosses fayl tae linger, Gunns are kent tae lurk!”

In any case, from an early period, the MacKays played a striking part in Scottish history, most notably in the northern Highlands.

In 1411, Donald, Lord of the Isles, pursuing his claim to the earldom of Ross, invaded Sutherland and was opposed at Dingwall by Angus Dubh (Black Angus) MacKay. The latter, however, was defeated and taken prisoner, and his brother, known by then simply as Roriegald, and many of the men who followed him, were slain.

Shortly after, Angus was released by the Lord of the Isles, who, wishing to cultivate an alliance of so powerful a chief, betrothed to him his daughter, Elizabeth, bestowing upon them many lands. This chief was known far and wide as Enneas-en-Imprissi, or “Angus the Absolute”, for his great martial power, evident in his ability to allegedly field 4,000 warriors. That prowess notwithstanding, Angus Dubh, along with his four sons, was arrested at Inverness by then King of the Scots, James I.

Following a brief imprisonment, Angus was pardoned, and released with three of his four sons, the eldest, Neill MacKay, being kept as a hostage to insure the clan’s continuing good behavior. Confined as he was in the Bass at the mouth of the Firth of Forth, he was ever after called Neill Wasse, or “Bass,” MacKay.

In 1437, Neill Wasse MacKay was released from his confinement in the Bass, and assumed the chiefship, but died the same year, leaving two sons, Angus, and John Roy MacKay, the latter founder of another branch, called the Sliochdean-Roy.

Angus, the elder son, assisted the ever-ambitious Keiths in invading the region of Caithness. For those efforts, Angus reaped the consequence of being cornered inside the church of Tarbet with a small band of retainers, by the pursuing men of Ross, whose lands he had
oft ravaged; and being trapped within beyond escape, was burnt to death.

Fortunately, Angus was survived by three sons, all by his wife, Catherine of Killernan. The first son was John Reawigh, so-called for the yellowish red color of his hair, who wed his cousin, Barbara, a daughter of the Scourie MacKay, chieftain. The middle son was Y-Roy; and lastly came Neill Naverigh, who is credited with founding the MacKays of Melness.

In 1516, Y-Roy MacKay gave his bond of service to the renowned cavalry commander Adam Gordon, brother of the Earl of Huntly, by marriage with Elizabeth, sister and heiress of the 9th Earl, but died soon after, the details of his demise being oddly unchronicled.

Purportedly, all three sons of Angus MacKay commemorated their father’s fiery death by smearing their foreheads with wood ash before riding forth to any armed conflict. Indeed, it is believed by many clan descendants this symbolic ash smudging might have led to the deep, dark, dusky colors later chosen for the MacKay tartan.

In 1556, Iye MacKay, the chief of the clan, was ambushed and captured while hunting, by a party of Sutherlands, who merrily bundled him off in chains aboard a coastal schooner to Edinburgh Castle as a gratuity to James V. As the king was continually being involved in settling disputes in the Caithness region, one can readily understand the appeal of currying favor in this way, but whatever the outcome of this abduction, history has overlooked it. The lesson therefrom was certainly not lost on Iye’s kinsmen - whether allies or enemies, Sutherlands were never to be trusted!

Grudges notwithstanding, though, the Sutherlands were never shy about using MacKays for their value. In the army raised by the Earl of Sutherland to oppose, in 1601, the threatened invasion of his territories by the Earl of Caithness, the vanguard was commanded by Patrick Gordon of Gartay, a cousin of Huntly, and Donald MacKay of Scourie, and the right wing by Hugh MacKay. Hugh had two sons, Sir Donald MacKay of Farr, first Lord Reay, and John, who, in defiance of past enmities, married a daughter of James Sinclair of Murkle.

Donald MacKay of Farr, the elder son, was created a peer of Scotland, by title of Lord Reay, in 1628, by no less than the monarch Charles I of Great Britain. From him, thereby, the land of the MacKays in Sutherland acquired the immortal name of “Lord Reay’s Country.”

The MacKay chiefs were zealous supporters of the Reformation, and as with many of the northwest clans, mustered their clan reliably for the Government forces, from the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689, to the blood-drenched fields of Culloden, in 1746, riding for King George and his redcoats. In recognition of such service, the MacKay soldiers would ultimately be shipped out for service in Belgium and the Netherlands, founding a military dynasty which served with distinction for many years in Holland, where they raised the McKay Dutch Regiment, under the command of Aeneas MacKay, who also settled his family there. A generation later, Aeneas’ son Barthold was created a Baron of the Dutch General States.

Back home, though, on their beloved, windswept moors of Caithness and Ross-shire, that history of martial glory and fervent loyalty
to the crown failed to shield their own hearths in that savage century following the triumph of the House of Hanover. The atrocities of the Clearances, especially beneath the brutal overlordship of their neighbors, and one-time allies, the Sutherlands, wracked and ravaged their fortunes as mercilessly as it did all the myriad lesser homesteads. Along with tens of thousands of others, the rolling uplands of northwest Scotland dwindled to but the bitterest of memories for the uprooted MacKays, and the cold, grey Atlantic proved just large enough to swallow all their tears.

By the rough midwifery of the Diaspora, the MacKays arrived in a hundred foreign ports and harbors, from whence they helped settle the New World. Like their evicted kinsmen, who rolled as vagabonds into the towns and cities of the Scottish Lowlands, those migrant MacKays came to be known by new neighbors, who, just as had their old ones, swiftly came to admire those Sons of Morgan for their quick wits, their stout hearts, and, always, just as boasted on the clan crest, their indomitably Strong Hands.

And now, Beloved Reader, I rise to go, but pause to thank you, be ye Kith, Kin, or Ilk, for joining us as warmly as you have, here at the welcoming embers of this quaint cyber-hearth; in a new season, I will return here, as shall you, I wager, for in our tribe of tales, on this wee, blue-green marble that spins in the dark, who among us dares not dream? For, come now, what more captivating spell could e’er be cast, than by uttering those four magic words:

“Tell Me a Story.”
The art of gift-giving is synonymous with Christmas, but in Scotland until the 1950s, Christmas was not celebrated in most Scottish homes. Many Scots worked over the traditional Christmas period and celebrated the winter solstice with a holiday and party on December 31 at Hogmanay. Christmas was not celebrated as a festival because it was considered “too Popish” for the kirk – a view that harked back to the years of the Protestant Reformation. While naughty children the world over were hoping they wouldn’t get coal in their Christmas stockings, the Scots considered it lucky to be given coal, whisky and shortbread by a handsome first- footer on New Year’s Eve.

First-footing is a tradition that has long been practised in Scotland. It is part of the Hogmanay celebrations that take place in private homes and festivals across Scotland and has always been a much bigger celebration than Christmas.

Prior to the Reformation of 1560, Christmas in Scotland – or Yule as it was known – was celebrated in a similar fashion to the rest of Catholic Europe, however the Reformation led to the abolition of traditional Christian feasting days. It was only after the Second World War that Christmas celebrations began to take place, at first rather quietly, as the Presbyterian Church of Scotland did not place much emphasis on the Christmas festival.
Christmas Day only became a public holiday in Scotland in 1958.

Boxing Day was not declared a public holiday in Scotland until 1974, but the tradition of gift giving on that day, December 26, stemmed from masters of estates and employers giving a box (or barrel) of food to their workers as a thank you for a good year’s harvest or work.

The custom of first-footing has a long history and is as popular as ever.

To ensure that a household has good luck for the coming year, the first person to cross the threshold should be a dark-haired male who brings a piece of coal, a dram of whisky and some shortbread or black bun, and sometimes salt and a silver coin as well.

The preference for a dark male is believed to stem from the days of the Vikings, when a burly fair-haired man landing on your doorstep usually meant trouble.

“Lang may yer lum reek” is a popular saying in Scotland at the start of a new year. Literally translated as “long may your chimney smell” a gift of coal would ensure that you always had fuel for your fire, and could therefore stay warm. The whisky and food also ensured warmth and comfort.

There are a number of practices that have been traditionally carried out by Scottish households for centuries, to literally sweep away the old year and ring in the new.

If you want to give yourself and your family the gift of good luck for the coming year, there are a few things you can do to ensure prosperity.

On New Year’s Eve, clean your house and take out the ashes from the fire. If you owe money to anyone, it is tradition to pay your debts before “the bells” sound at midnight so that you start the new year with a clean slate. The Bells is a term used to describe the midnight hour when New Year’s Eve becomes New Year’s Day.

Choose a dark-haired male friend to be your first-footer and assemble the gifts ready to be brought into the house.

Gather friends and family at your home to celebrate the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new year. Immediately after midnight, everyone joins hands and forms a circle to sing Robert Burns’ Auld Lang Syne.

Your first-footer will knock three times on your door and be the first person to cross your threshold after midnight. He will then hand the gifts to the owner of the house and accept a whisky to toast the new year with them. This is an important part of the ritual as it is considered bad luck not to offer the first-footer a drink, and it is symbolic of inviting good luck to stay.

Hogmanay and first-footing are all about celebrating the greatest gift anyone can have – friends and family.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Read of life in Scotland’s 19th century coal mining communities in Carmel’s novel Ours, Yours and Mines, based on her own family’s experiences, and visit her on the web at www.scottishbooks.webs.com.

Carmel’s book, available on amazon.com
This year, I treated myself to a wonderful gift, something I have always wanted. I traced my mother’s side of our family tree. When I received the information package I felt like a child on Christmas morning under the tree. What a thrill! Thoughts of myself as a wee child in the candy store. The anticipation of waiting to open the wrappings to see what I had.

It was a lovely surprise, as my mother’s father, my Grandpa, had so many Mac’s on the branches. Of course, after reading my family history, the first thing I did was head to the internet. I was very impressed looking up these last names, all from the Isle of Lewis, with each family name having a Norse connection.

In the April 2014 issue of the *Celtic Guide* magazine, I wrote an article about the Isle of Lewis and the Vikings. The Isle of Lewis once belonged to Norway. Scotland purchased it from them in the Treaty of Perth, in 1266.

Since many of the Vikings married locals, they stayed on the island. It makes me wonder what has happened to the Norwegian surnames. The only sign of any Norwegian names left on the isle are the names of the districts.

While researching, I noticed one name that stood out among the rest – MacLeod. Researching that name, I found that the Clan MacLeod of Lewis was a sept of Clan Macleod of the Isle of Skye. Both have their own unique badges and mottos. The MacLeods of Lewis’s motto is “I brin quil I se,” meaning “I burn while I shall burn.” The historic seat is listed as Stornoway Castle.
Kindreds of this clan are the Macaulay family of Lewis. The Macaulay name is also in my family tree.

The Clan MacLeod of the Isle of Skye’s motto is “Hold Fast.” The chieftain seat is Dunvegan Castle.

The kindred clans are the MacCrimmons (piping family) and Beatons (medical).

At the time of my research and my discoveries about my heritage, I was writing a children’s adventure story. The history of the MacLeod Clan was so fascinating I felt compelled to incorporate it into my novel. I was so inspired I have now completed it and am ready to publish my novel. That is how Anna and the Faerie hosts came to fruition.

Allow me a brief recap of this legendary story:

Many many years ago, the Chief of Clan MacLeod, who was a handsome and intelligent man, met a faerie princess (a bean sidhe). She fell in love with him, and he with her.

When the faerie princess appealed to the King of the Faeries for permission to marry this handsome chief, he refused, saying her heart would be broken. This he did not want, as humans age and die, while faeries live forever.

She cried and wept so much that even the king relented and agreed that she and the chief could wed for a year and a day. At the end of that time she must return to the land of faeries and leave behind everything from the human world. She agreed.

In that year she had born a male child. It broke her heart to leave her child and her chieftain, but her word was given and leave she must. Upon her departure she gave the “Faerie Flag” that she had left him. The MacLeods took this flag into every battle that they fought and won. Today that flag is in part in ruins, and is encased on display in Dunvegan castle which is the chieftain’s seat, for all to admire. When asked about the Faerie Flag, the chieftain will respond, “I believe it is a true story.”

My Grandpa was with the Scottish Horse, assigned to the Inniskilling Dragoons in the capacity called Shoeing Smith. During the First World War, it became apparent that technology had moved forward with greater destructive power and made horsed cavalry redundant on the modern battlefield.
My Grandpa, being a blacksmith, attended to the war horses in his regiment. Have you seen the movie *War Horse*? Those horses did not have much of a chance, did they? The Inniskilling Dragoons saw service for two centuries before being amalgamated with the 5th Princess Charlotte of Wales’s Dragoon Guards, to form the 5th/6th Dragoons in 1922. My Grandpa died early in life. Mum told me it was from being kicked in the stomach by a horse.

I must also remark that my maternal grandmother was also from the Highlands of Scotland. She too had many Norse descendants on that side of the family, but not many Mac’s. However, there are some very old unusual names descendent from the Viking era.

In 2017, I am going to get my dad’s side of the family traced. That is not going to be so easy. My paternal grandmother was Irish. She was born in Ballyclare, County Antrim. Now that is another great place of history. Not only has it Viking connections, but the Giant’s Causeway site is in the area. It is owned and managed by the National Trust. This is an area of about 40,000 interlocking basalt columns – the result of an ancient volcanic eruption. The legend of the columns states that they are the remains of a causeway built by a giant. The story continues with the Irish giant Fionn MacCumhaill (Finn MacCool) from the Fenian cycle of Gaelic mythology being challenged to a fight by the Scottish giant Benandonner.

Fionn accepted this challenge and built the causeway across the North Channel so that the two giants could meet. There is more than one version of how this plays out. In one, Fionn’s wife disguises him as a baby and tucks him in a cradle. When Benandonner sees the size of the baby, he reckons that his father Fionn must be a giant among giants. He flees back to Scotland in fright, destroying the causeway behind him so that Fionn could not follow. Across the sea there are identical basalt columns (a part of the same ancient lava flow) at Fingal’s Cave on the Scottish Isle of Staffa.

In Irish mythology, Fionn is not a giant but a hero with supernatural abilities. In *Faerie and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, it is noted that over time the pagan gods of Ireland grew smaller and smaller in the popular imagination until they turned into the faeries; the pagan heroes grew bigger and bigger until they turned into the giants.

My paternal grandpa is a bit of a mystery. He was born in Denny, Stirlingshire, Scotland. Grandad left Scotland during the Depression to sail to America, leaving behind his wife and four kids. He was never heard from again. Tracing my grandad will be quite a challenge.

If you have not had your family tree traced, I highly recommend it. If you are able to get information about your ancestors from your living relations, do not hesitate to ask before it is too late. It is so much harder to trace the past when all the family with all the wonderful stories have gone as well.
The Sluagh

Twas the longest, darkest night of the year,
The pale light of dim stars woke many a hidden fear.

Come closer my friend, to learn of a tale
A tale that’s the story of the Midnight Well.
Some swore it was evil, or so it was said,
This was the night that filled all with dread.

Once upon a time, and so it goes,
A beautiful lady was far from home.
The shaking, it woke her,
Perhaps naught but a dream.
Then it was closer, lightning split dark,
Bright as a beam.

As she peered carefully out the door,
A shadow moved, then dozens more.
Fascinated, she waited as closer they came
Then more defined the shadows became.

The wind whirled clouds low and ‘round,
It tore at her hair that fell unbound.
The clouds blew past the cold winter’s moon
What would now be her fortune?

A whispered voice called her name,
Over and over, it sounded the same.
Demanding, commanding, no invitation
It filled her soul with trepidation.

As he approached, he saw a soft glow,
With certainty, he did know
The soft and steady glow of her soul
Might be the one to make him once again whole.

“Come away with me,” he said,
“Come away with me now.
Stay with me, lay with me, and this I vow –
I will love you forever, and serve ye well,
If you gi’ yourself to me, fore’er we’ll dwell.”

Rooted in place, fear filled her heart,
She knew she was doomed from the start
It was far too late as he reached down
It was then she saw he wore a crown.

“A geis holds me in the deepest thrall
I must bring a soul, born en caul,
One with The Sight, a Seer to be.”
He spoke from atop the fire-eyed black steed.

She knew not of being with Sight,
Nor was she a Seer,
So she believed perhaps she did mishear.
He pulled her up to him and held her close.

Turning his mount, he urged him on,
Taking the pretty young maid along.
Fire burned in his eyes for her.
Her skin reminded him of alabaster.

Strands of his dark hair began to bind,
Wrapping ‘round to ensnare.
Captivated, she no longer cared
No more to hear those calling, she left behind.

She disappeared into the night
On the back of a pitch black steed
Dissipating away from the light
Where would this path for her lead?

And so she was gone to The Sluagh place.
With the Dark Prince who had Fallen from Grace.
She would be the one to release him from the geis,
Ne’er again to see a sunrise.
For this edition I’ve dug through the archives to find some fascinating folk traditions recorded in historic Wales. As with all European folk customs, similar traditions will be usually found in other countries. Some shared customs are virtually identical, while others offer variations or twists unique to their local region.

**Y Gwyliau**

The Midwinter Holiday in Wales

Accounts of Christmas in Wales confirm that, as in other parts of Britain and the wider Europe, Christmas was a full season not just one special day. There were a variety of holy days and customs found throughout the Yuletide season. In a chapter called “Seasonal Festivities” from her book *Welsh Traditional Music*, Phyllis Kinney says:

“Early in the eighteenth century, Wales was almost entirely rural. It was a country on the fringe of Europe without cities or a capital and with a small population – more people lived in London than in the whole of Wales – which was largely dependent on agriculture and ruled by the seasons.”

This means certain seasonal traditions could linger on in Wales while other parts of Britain had moved on, making Wales a window into the past.

Due to the heavily rural nature of Welsh life, most of the festivities still took place in the homes that dotted the countryside. Even the traditional agricultural lifestyle, though it consisted of hard work, still contrived to bring the folk together, and then traditional folk customs, tales, and songs could be shared even while hard at work shearing sheep, reaping harvest, or preparing foodstuffs. This lifestyle meant that tradition was interwoven with the very fabric of Welsh life and world view.

The time of year that we refer to as “The Christmas Season,” today, was known as “Y Gwyliau” in Welsh, meaning simply “The Holidays.”

This encompassed about three weeks of rest and revelry where very little farm work was done. It was common for farmhouses to have a “table room,” *rw mford* in Welsh, where farm hands would be welcomed to drink beer and feast as they roamed from farm to farm.

Farmlhands placed their ploughs under the tables as they feasted, and interestingly, they
appear to have given an offering of beer to their ploughs before they had a sip themselves. This is supposed to be in thanks of the ploughs’ service through the year and recognition that though they are still for now, they will be needed again soon.

This act seems to be a remnant from a pre-Christian indigenous European world view which saw the world in a more animistic light.

Everything is imbued with a spirit and those spirits must be propitiated if their positive intercession is to be expected.

Trick or Treat at Christmas?

A tradition that struck me as exceptionally noteworthy is called “Thomassing.” This might be passed over with a cursory glance by others, but after reading a great deal on folk customs over the years I have noticed a pattern that no one else seems to be discussing, so first some background information:

Thomassing is the custom of going door to door asking for foodstuffs at sacred times of the year. It is remembered today in the American custom of Halloween “trick or treating,” which was brought over with Scots-Irish immigrants.

What most people do not realize is that this custom was not relegated only to Halloween. In the December, 2013 issue of Celtic Guide (which you can find on CelticGuide.com) I wrote an article called “The Hidden History of Christmas Carols,” which discusses the similarity between Christmas caroling and trick or treating.

Traditionally, Christmas carolers used to ask for food in return for their carols. Just as trick-or-treaters threaten a “trick” if you don’t give them a treat, Christmas carolers historically were quite a rowdy, even drunken, lot.

This custom was likely very widespread throughout Europe, and a Romanian version is discussed in the article on Christmas carols.

Interestingly, this door-to-door custom is found very strongly in Wales. While Halloween trick-or-treat is attributed to Scots-Irish tradition, the door-to-door custom has been recorded in Wales at both Christmas and Candlemas. In addition to the door-to-door custom occurring at holidays other than Halloween, it is also noted that caroling occurred at holidays other than Christmas. While this likely happened throughout Britain, and indeed Europe, it was recorded specifically in Wales.
One article of particular interest is “The Celebration of Candlemas in Wales,” by Trefor M. Owen. In this scholarly article about the Candlemas holiday, the word “carol” is mentioned seventy-two times, emphasizing the overwhelming evidence of caroling during a holiday other than Christmas. Candlemas is another holiday with known pagan origins, being the Christianized version of the old Celtic pagan *Imbolc*.

Owen shares one account of Welsh Candlemas caroling wherein the revelers go around town and sing outside of homes. This sounds innocent… at first.

*What ensues is the carolers sing bawdy songs about the Virgin Mary (no wonder the Church considering caroling sacrilegious!) and hurl insults at the home-owners! The homeowners are then obliged to return the insults to the carolers. Whichever group outwits the other in verse would be declared the winner. If the revelers won, they must be allowed inside and given food and beverage (Owen pp242-243).*

*And, interestingly, Owen mentions that wassailing was done at Halloween as well as Christmas and Candlemas and other holidays (p247). (Carolyn Emerick, “The Hidden History of Christmas Carols,” *Celtic Guide* 2013).*

Jacqueline Simpson discusses Thomassing in her book *The Folklore of the Welsh Border*. The practice was called Thomassing because it occurred on St. Thomas’ Day, the 21st of December. The poor women of the area would go door-to-door carrying a large sack, or some other receptacle, and ask for food staples such as grains, cheese, etc. The practice was also called “gooding” or “corning.” Those names, I would guess, would have to do with seeking the good will of neighbors to share some corn, which in Britain means grain. In many regions, poor families would receive free grain and then the local miller would ground it free of charge so that each family could have cakes for Christmas Day.

*Mari Lwyd Wassailing with a Hobby Horse*  
*Mari Lwyd* is universally considered to have pre-Christian roots, and was adapted to the Christian holiday season. The word means “Grey Mare” for its association with horses. It was once widespread throughout Wales, but has mainly been seen in recent history in Llangynwyd near Maesteg (although it is being revived elsewhere).

*Mari Lwyd in Wales, circa 1910*

On New Year’s Day, another door-to-door procession occurs, wherein a horse’s skull is propped up on a pole, decorated with streaming ribbons, and draped with a white cloth. The skull is decorated with false eyes and ears.

At each house, the revelers recite rhyming verse at those who dwell inside. Those inside respond in verse and refuse to let the Mari Lwyd enter until a rhyming battle of words (and insults) ensues. This is remarkably similar to wassailing and trick or treating as discussed above and in more detail in “The Hidden History of Christmas Carols.”
Plygain
Watching the Dawn

The custom of Plygain is mentioned in both Jacqueline Simpson’s book, and in Wirt Sikes’ *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*. Sikes says that it was popular in Wales to gather at church at three in the morning. Everyone would hold small green candles designed specifically for this purpose. Whereas Simpson says that they gathered at 5 or 6 am.

Sometimes the meetings occurred at farms or in cottages. But, in any event, the people gathered to sing carols as the dawn arose in the sky. There are many old attempts to explain this custom. But it seems tied into the recognition of the importance of the Winter Solstice as a turning point in the year, in my opinion.

Music and Song

It would be remiss to discuss Welsh holiday festivities without a mention of Welsh musical tradition. It has been glossed over in each of these other traditions that song was a part of nearly all of the Welsh holiday festivities.

When the peasantry gathered for seasonal work, they often sang together. When they went door to door, whether carrying a decorated horse’s head or to beg for grain, song was often a present element. And, when the folk gathered early on Christmas morning to watch the sun rise, they sang Christmas carols together. The wassail customs found in England had their own counterparts in Wales, to be sure.

At Yuletide, when the wassail bowl is passed round, people of all European nations imbibe of the jolly nectars of the season. So, I should like to leave you with a rhyme that I found while researching this article:

*When an Englishman is drunk he is belligerent; When a Frenchman is drunk he is amorous; When an Italian is drunk he is loquacious; When a Scotchman is drunk he is argumentative; When a German is drunk he is sleepy; When an American is drunk he brags; And when a Welshman is drunk he sings.*

Wales, like Scotland, will feature traditions that have influences in both the pagan Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultures, as well as customs that developed in the more recent Christian era. Most of Britain is a tapestry woven by these shared influences. In parts of the British Isles, Danish and Norse heritage is thrown into the mix, peppered by regional elements that give distinct local flavor.

So whether you carry Welsh ancestry in your family or not, I hope you can find some inspiration for keeping old European folk traditions alive in your household this holiday.

Bibliography


In my October issue I called on our readers to send me an email with ideas for 2017. While I received many nice emails, there weren’t enough to help me decide the path forward. After much thought, and not wanting to give up on the *Celtic Guide* entirely, I’ve decided, at least for 2017, to publish just two issue, one just before Beltaine, and one just before Samhain. These are probably the two most popular Celtic holidays and they are certainly our most popular issues. With May 1st comes the promise of summer and long, sunny days. With November 1st comes the promise of a new year, a time to hunker down and prepare for winter, but also a time to contemplate where the new year will take us. These are my plans for now, but since this has always been an organic publication, we’ll see where we “naturally” end up. Thank you to everyone for everything!!!!!!!

Deadlines for each issue will be as follows:

April 1st, for the May issue.
October 1st, for the November issue.

Since there will be more competition for available space, I would suggest not waiting until the last minute to submit your articles. **There will be no specific themes for these issues.**

As always, there are plenty of back issue on this site to read, plus our Facebook page will stay current with postings from around the world, all administered by people other than myself.

If we get too many submissions for the PDF magazine, I’ll publish some of them right on the *Celtic Guide* website. I hope everyone understands and continues to enjoy our efforts.