

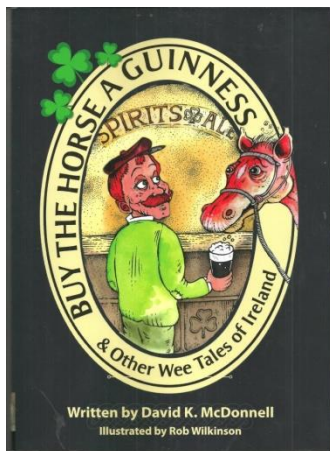
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BOOK BY BOOK PUBLICITY

## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID McDONNELL

### AUTHOR OF

## “BUY THE HORSE A GUINNESS (& OTHER WEE TALES OF IRELAND)”



**David McDonnell** is a critically acclaimed author and storyteller (“seanchai” in the words of the Irish) with a passion for Irish and Irish-American history. His passion and story-telling skills have enchanted and educated both readers and listeners in both America and Ireland.

*ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland*, David’s first book, won three national literary awards and received universally positive book reviews. *ClanDonnell* is a collection of stories of an Irish clan which tell the history of Ireland in an entertaining, easy-to-read fashion. The tone is that of an oral history. The human stories, numerous illustrations, and humor bring the history of Ireland to life for the

non-historian reader.

David’s latest book, *Buy The Horse A Guinness (& Other Wee Tales of Ireland)* is a collection of eight short stories, each of which were in his repertoire of oral stories. The book is whimsically illustrated by talented British artist Rob Wilkinson. His next book, a fictional story set in both Detroit and Dublin, will be published in 2020.

David has appeared at Irish and Celtic festivals, bookstores, libraries, heritage centers, Irish pubs and other retailers, on his national and international book and story-telling tours. Presentations always include entertaining and informative stories of Ireland with full audience interaction. McDonnell has a vast repertoire of stories and an encyclopedic memory for details and is creative and flexible in his approach to presentations. David’s stories draw upon Irish history, culture and folklore, with his vivid imagination and wry sense of humor added to the mix.

David earned his bachelor's and doctorate degrees at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He practiced law in Detroit and suburbs for over 30 years and now writes from his home on Grand Traverse Bay near Traverse City, Michigan, enjoying the sunset over Lake Michigan nearly every evening. His immediate clan includes his wife, four children, a grandson and a granddaughter.

**Welcome, David! Thank you for joining us today at Reader Views. Tell us about your latest book, “Buy the Horse a Guinness: & Other Wee Tales of Ireland”.**



*Buy The Horse A Guinness* is a collection of eight of my oral stories. I have a repertoire of oral stories which I've told at Irish festivals, pubs, cultural centers, as well as libraries and bookstores. I've often been asked if my stories were available in a book, and until *Buy The Horse A Guinness*, I had to answer “no.” I grew tired of saying “no,” so I chose several of them to incorporate into a book. I thought that with some whimsical illustrations, it would be a fun, easy read. Some of these stories are my takes on some old folk tales, and some are my original stories.

**I love the title! How did you come up with it and what inspired you to write this book?**

The title popped into my head while I was working on a story. I led a storytelling workshop at an Irish festival, and I asked the participants to describe something – anything – to illustrate and enhance descriptive skills. One woman explained that she was late for the workshop because she had to care for a sick horse. We spent some time building a story around a sick horse, when another participant suggested that horses are sometimes allergic to hay. A substitute for hay, such as barley, is often the solution.

I knew, as perhaps the participants didn't, that Guinness is made with barley. I immediately said: “Well, that is the solution. Buy the horse a Guinness!”

I've done several storytelling workshops, and perhaps that provided me with the motivation to write the book. I wanted to put some of my oral stories in writing, but I also wanted to expose readers to the art of oral storytelling. Perhaps I should have gone a step further by inserting a CD with each book.

**What is a *Seanchai*?**

The Irish word *seanchai* literally means “bearer of old lore”. In ancient Celtic culture, the history, laws, and legends of the people were not written down, but memorized by the *seanchai*

– often in long lyrical poems. They developed a huge stock pile of stories, and adopted a variety of storytelling styles. Because of the difficulty of this process, an experienced *seanchaí* typically mentored a younger seanchaí. Thus the old lore was passed down generation after generation.

The word *seanchaí* evolved over time to simply mean “storyteller”. A seanchaí can not only tell historical tales and legends, but can also spin a good yarn. A seanchaí is an entertainer who can hold an audience spellbound through a long story or series of short tales.

This may be a reason why the Irish hold the written and spoken word in high regard, and why there are so many brilliant Irish authors, playwrights, poets and storytellers. A person of wit, or one who can turn a phrase, or who can describe a person or place with humor and charm, is highly respected. Mastery of language is important to the Irish.

Here is an example. The decades long conflict in Northern Ireland often led to violence. The causes are quite complex, with political, economic, historical and religious roots. The peace process was extremely difficult with many moving parts eventually falling into place. To the Irish, this long period of conflict is universally known as “The Troubles”. I’m still amazed that this complicated era of history is known by two words.

### **When did you first develop your passion for storytelling?**

I’m a late bloomer. I’ve been writing for many years, but I didn’t get involved in oral storytelling until recently. My first book, *ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland*, contains true stories of an Irish clan. To promote the book, I gave many talks at many different types of venues. These were true stories, but truth is indeed often stranger than fiction and these talks were as entertaining as educational. I was soon invited to Irish festivals and storytelling affairs, and my

repertoire was expanded to include ancient legends and folklore, and humorous yarns.



I discovered that, number one, I had a knack for this, and, number two, I enjoyed it immensely. I’ve learned how to hold audience attention for an hour-long session and keep them enthralled in the stories. I maintain eye contact throughout the session, and I can see how well the stories, or my delivery of the stories, are working (or, sometimes, not working). I find the laughter from time to time, and the applause at the end, to be extremely rewarding.

I’m also proud to be part of a small group of people who are trying to keep oral storytelling alive and vibrant. It is not, by any means, a lost art, but there are far fewer practitioners that there were in the days of the seanchaí.

## **You incorporate a lot of humor in your writing. Does that come from performing your stories live onstage?**

I've always had a strange sense of humor, and I find some things funny that elude others. It's a dry humor which often incorporates sarcasm, irony and absurdities.

I don't think my humor comes from performing live, but I have put my humor to good use on stage. I must confess that I spent a lot of time thinking about the best way to present a story in a way bring about laughter.

## **What kind of challenges, if any, did you encounter taking the stories in your head and putting them on paper?**

It was much more challenging than I anticipated. I've told these stories many times and I thought putting them on paper would be a breeze. The essential components of storytelling are the same, whether written or oral.

But there are things inherently different about live storytelling. A hand gesture or other body movement, a long pause, the volume or tone of voice, the dialect, are a few of the options available in oral stories which are not always easy to convert to a written story.

I also react to a vocal audience and often take a story in a different direction, depending upon the input of the crowd. Stories come out differently depending upon the audience. I had to decide which of my many versions of a story would work best on paper.

## **How long did it take you write and compile these stories into a book of Irish tales?**

I already had the stories in my head as oral stories. It took me several months to get the eight stories in acceptable written form. They went through several rewrites after that while I was waiting for the illustrations to be finished.

## **Who do you write for? Do you have a target audience?**

My most frequent venues are Irish and Celtic festivals, Irish pubs, and Irish cultural centers. Even my other venues – book stores, libraries, and the like - bill me as an “author and Irish storyteller”. This means that my audience is predominately Irish-Americans.

Irish-Americans are a wonderful audience. They are sponges, eager to soak up as much Irish history and culture as they can. They also have their own stories to share.

I've also found that there is a great deal of misunderstanding about Ireland, even among Irish-Americans who have traveled to Ireland. I love to give historical talks and shed some enlightenment on their ancestors. I also try to insert some elements of history and culture in my yarns, as a form of “disguised learning”.

Of course, not everyone in my audience is Irish. Some folks simply like to hear a few good yarns.

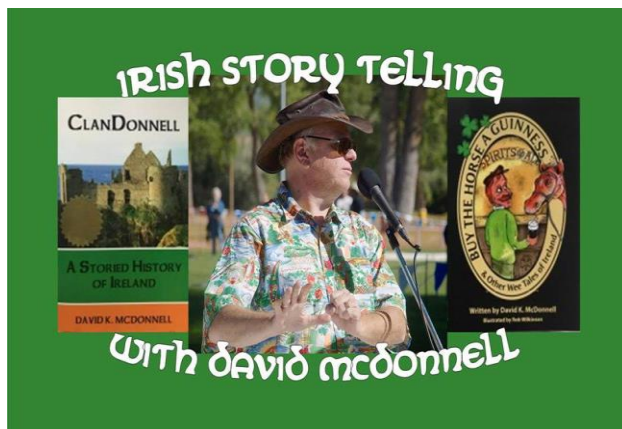
### **What do you hope to accomplish through your writing?**

Educate, enlighten, and entertain. That is all I can hope to achieve with my writing.

It is also quite cathartic for me.

### **You have a busy promotional tour lined up for “Buy the Horse a Guinness.” What does a day in the life on a book tour look like?**

I spend most of my book tours driving. I bought a new car a few years ago and it already has nearly 150,000 miles on it. We’ve gone north, south, east and west, in a Subaru loaded with books, luggage, display materials, and two travelling dogs.



I try to line up a large event first. This is usually an Irish festival. Then I try to find nearby bookstores, cultural centers, libraries, and Irish pubs to keep me busy on the way to and from the festival.

My “Chesapeake Bay Tour” earlier this year was particularly hectic, with three states and eight events in ten days. It included an Irish festival in Maryland, a one-man show at an Annapolis Irish pub, another pub in Virginia,

book stores in Maryland and Virginia, and an Irish cultural club in Delaware.

Our tours are not all business. My wife and I enjoy travelling and try to include as much sightseeing and adventures as we can.

Touring has also led me back to Ireland several times, with another trip planned in November. The Irish, to my surprise, are quite receptive to hearing Irish stories from an American seanchaí.

### **What is one thing you wish you knew when you started out?**

If I had known how much fun this journey would be, I would have started earlier in my life.

### **Do you have any advice for aspiring/emerging authors?**

Write and write some more. I meet many aspiring authors, with wonderful ideas and desires. They pitch their ideas to me and I tell all the same thing – get started. Write something down, anything. Writing leads to more ideas which lead to more writing!

**Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?**

I thoroughly enjoy creating, telling, and writing these stories. I only hope readers enjoy them as well.

**David, thank you so much for joining us today at Reader Views. It's been a pleasure learning more about you and your work!**

Thank you.

## **CONNECT WITH DAVID MCDONNELL!**

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This interview is at [www.readerviews.com/interviewmcdonnellbuythehorseaguinness](http://www.readerviews.com/interviewmcdonnellbuythehorseaguinness)

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