



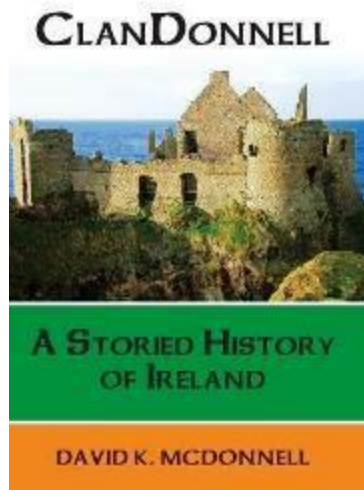
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Celtic Life International, www.celticlifecom.com

ClanDonnell; A Storied History of Ireland is the epic tale of the Emerald Isle told through the lives of historic McDonnell Clan members and their descendants. Recently, Celtic Life International spoke with the book’s author David K. McDonnell.

What inspired/motivated you to put this book together?

My innate curiosity got the better of me. I’ve wondered many times “Why is my last name McDonnell?” and “Why was I born an American?” I finally decided to seek the answers.



The search took me to Ireland. Folks there took last names in about the 12th Century, and almost everyone took the name of their clan. My last name told me a lot about my ancestors. McDonnell clan members (by that name) were descendants of Somhairle and the Three Collas of the Dal Riata Celtic tribe. For centuries, they traveled back and forth from what are now Northern Ireland and Scotland, and the Hebrides Islands in between, and settled on both sides of the North Channel.

This was also a region heavily influenced in earlier centuries by the Vikings. The clan melded the fighting techniques of the Irish, Scots, and Vikings and became the fiercest warriors in the British Isles. And being entrepreneurs, they made this a business plan. They sold their services as mercenary warriors to other clans, and few clans were willing to go to war without first hiring ClanDonnell as an ally.

These were fascinating people with fascinating stories. The stories included murders, assassinations, damsels in distress, Viking maidens, witches' spells, piracy, and elements more commonly found in fiction. I almost had no choice – I had to assemble these stories into a book.

The second question -- “Why am I an American?” -- took me beyond the Irish clan era. I researched the wars with England, the subjugation of the Irish



people, the confiscation of Irish land, the forced-dependency on the potato, the subsistence (and all-too-often below-subsistence) level of the rural Irish, and ultimately the Great Hunger. I used the McDonnells – descendants of ClanDonnell – to tell these stories, since I found McDonnells in all walks of Irish life: landlords and tenants, rural and urban, Catholics and Protestants, wealthy and impoverished.

It became painfully obvious why so many Irish left Ireland. My great-grandfather left in 1845. He was only 19 years old and he left his family behind. My understanding of the Ireland of that era gave me insight into my great-grandfather. I now understand why he left the island and why he came to America. I now understand why I was born an American.

I didn't set out to write a history of Ireland. But the stories of people in ClanDonnell and their descendants, put in context of the times, indeed told the story of the island.

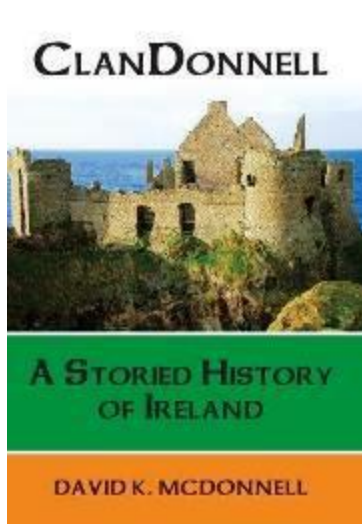
Did it come together quickly or did you really need to work at it?

I started collecting clan stories a decade or so ago. But once I started in earnest, it took several years to do the research and writing. This was followed by two more years of editing, re-writing, fact-checking, and the like. I would not call this “quickly”.

But it did not seem like work. Almost every bit of research led me to something, which led me to something else, and led me to even more. This could have been overwhelming if it hadn't been so much fun. I had many "Eureka" moments, when I connected bits of information from multiple sources and had a clear picture of what was really going on. I felt a connection to the people in the stories and this kept me motivated throughout the process.

What was the most challenging aspect of the process?

The challenge was bringing these people and these stories to life for the reader. I did not want to write an historical treatise – I have a doctorate degree already and was not looking for a tenured professorship or PhD in Gaelic Studies. Nor did I wish to reach historians as my audience. Rather, I wanted to write for



non-historians – people generally curious about Ireland who were looking for a good read. These are the people ordinarily turned off by history books, and history in general. Perhaps this can be traced to the manner in which history is taught in our schools, which most people find boring.

I believe I overcame this challenge with a few tricks. I wrote the book in the first person, something rarely done in historical non-fiction. I wanted the reader to share my journey and feel the same sense of discovery that I did.

I also used more than a fair amount of humor. I've been accused of having a strange sense of humor, and I certainly find humor in strange places. Like the ancient monks who spent decades tracing the history of Ireland, and concluded that the first humans to come to the island did so less than a month before the Biblical great flood. Noah and his ark saved the human race, but these first Irish surely drown a few weeks after their arrival.

And like clan genealogy, firmly established and documented for a millennium and a half, now undone by DNA evidence. And like the 16th Century McDonnell warrior who married a McMahon woman. On his wedding night, he passed out from "aroma of the wine". His new father-in-law tied him up, took him out to the middle of a lake, and threw him overboard. The McMahon woman

became a bride and a widow on the same day. I hope the readers enjoy these stories as much as I did.

I also used over 600 illustrations. Some are in color in a few insert sections, but most are black and white in the midst of the stories. Many of these are new photographs, but as many are historical photos, contemporary artists paintings and drawings, maps – each of which make the stories easier to follow.

Finally, I avoided charts, graphs, footnotes, and statistics that fill most histories. These are the stuff historians (including me) love, but everyone else hates. Once in a while I caught myself getting too detailed and too scholarly. I needed to slap myself in the face and get back to the stories and the real people.

What was the most rewarding part of the experience?



I loved the cooperation I received from people while doing the research. I wrote hundreds of emails and made an equal number of phone calls, trying to track down sources, verify information, and obtain permission to use images. People were always eager to help.

And I especially loved my trip to Ireland, after the first draft was complete. The trip was mainly a photo shoot – getting images I needed to illustrate the stories. But along the way, I spoke to many people about the project and everyone seemed genuinely excited about the book.

What did you learn during the process?

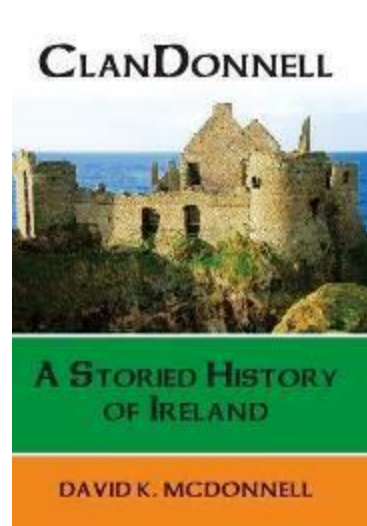
I started the process with a broad, general knowledge of Irish history and Celtic culture, but I needed details for the stories. I wanted to write about real people in real situations.

What surprised me was the amount of detailed information I found. Frankly, I could not have written this book had I not lived in the 21st Century.

I read many treatises, essays, journals, and the like, written in the 18th and 19th Centuries, and some much, much earlier. I didn't have to go into dusty basements of university libraries to find them. They've been digitized and can be read online. They contain many, many firsthand accounts of critical events in Irish history. I did spend many hours in dusty libraries, but only to tie up loose ends from information found online.

And I'll give you two other examples, one from Canada. *ClanDonnell* retells the horrific experience of Irish and Canadians at Grosse Ile in 1847. The vast number of Irish aboard the coffin ships in the St. Lawrence River, most afflicted with one famine fever or another, was more than Canadian officials and volunteers could handle. The fever spread to all of the communities along the St. Lawrence and to Toronto.

Quebec City news reporters and officials diligently attempted to identify the Irish passengers and they assembled volumes of records. These included passenger names, ship, and port of departure. They interviewed ship captains and crews to identify those Irish buried at sea, and interviewed passengers who made it to Grosse Ile, whether in fever or not. I lost count of the hours I spent reviewing these records, trying to discern enough information to tell a few stories.



But I reviewed these records without ever leaving my laptop. These records are all at the Library and Archives Canada and are online.

Incidentally, readers may be a bit surprised by the most common name of the Irish passengers to Canada in 1847. It wasn't Murphy or Kelly. The most common name of the Irish passengers, according to the death records at the Library and Archives Canada, is "inconnu" or "unknown", depending upon the native language of the person who completed the death record.

Another example is the 1641 depositions. The Ulster Rebellion in 1641 pitted a Protestant army and a Catholic army against each other in the northern Irish counties. The Catholic army was often followed by a Catholic mob, and as the army took control of a region, the mob murdered Protestants and burned Protestant homes. The Protestant army was often followed by a Protestant mob, and as the army took control of a region, the mob murdered Catholics and burned Catholic homes.

After the rebellion, the English sent officials to Ulster to document the many atrocities. Over 8,000 depositions were taken, all hand-written and based upon the testimony of witnesses to various atrocities. The English were only interested in the Catholic-on-Protestant atrocities, but testimony was also assembled on the Protestant-on-Catholic atrocities. The depositions were taken to London and often used for anti-Irish propaganda.

A century later, the depositions were delivered to Trinity College Dublin. Copies were published in a 26 volume set in the 18th Century. Good luck trying to find this set at your local library.

But Trinity College Dublin recently completed a several year project to digitize the depositions. Today, nearly all of them are available to be read online. I must confess that I did not read them all, but I certainly read enough to get a flavor of the rebellion.

How did you feel when the book was completed?

An incredible sense of relief!

What has the response been like so far from those that have read it?



The response has been quite favorable. I was hoping that readers would be entertained, as well as informed, and thus far that is the feedback I'm receiving. I've had a few positive book reviews, but we're still early in the process.

Are we doing enough to preserve & promote Celtic culture?

I believe musicians are. Musicians have done a tremendous job preserving and promoting Celtic culture. I love listening to traditional Celtic music, but musicians in Ireland, the UK and North America have creatively married the traditional and the modern.

I've also seen a revival of Celtic dance. It never went away in Ireland or Scotland, but I'm seeing more classes and performances here in North America.

People in Ireland are struggling to hang on to the Irish language. The Scots are having an even more difficult time holding on to Gaelic. Irish is mandatory in Irish schools (except in Northern Ireland), and proficiency is required for teachers, police officers, and public servants. But the schools focus on grammar and ancient poetry, and too few students learn conversational Irish. It's hard to preserve the language if few people use it in everyday life. I'm trying to learn Gaelic, but it is indeed a difficult language for an English speaker to learn.

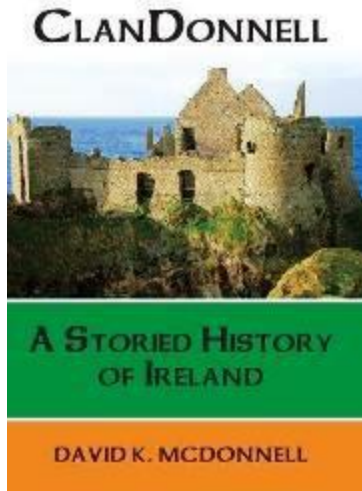
I hope *ClanDonnell* fills a gap by exposing Irish history to a broader audience. There are tens of millions of people around the world of Irish heritage,

and most of them haven't a clue about Irish history. Irish writers (and there are so many great ones) must keep the culture alive.

One of my favorite quotes is by Queen Elizabeth I in the 16th Century: "We will never conquer Ireland while the Bards are there."

What can we be doing better?

We need to better understand what Celtic culture is. It's more than the music, dance, language, history and literature. Celtic culture developed in Europe more than 2,500 years ago, and almost died out everywhere outside of the British Isles. It was a very communal culture. Available grazing land was used by all. Families tilled small plots of land, but shared the work at planting and harvest. Homes were in clusters where folk could talk, dance, and tell stories after a days' work.



A threat to anyone in a Celtic clan was a threat to all, and everyone in the clan came to the defense. When a Celtic clan prospered, everyone in the clan prospered. And when a clan suffered, everyone suffered. This communal notion continued in Ireland even through great famine. A poor family with only a few potatoes in the pot would willingly share what they had with a homeless, hungry passerby.

One may wonder whether the Celtic culture is relevant in the modern world. I would hope that it is.

What's next on your creative agenda?

The stories in *ClanDonnell* are true, but they've inspired several possible novels – and I hope to write them all.

My first is tentatively entitled *Corktown*. The main character is an older, alcoholic man, living in the changing Corktown neighborhood in 1950s Detroit. To avoid a spoiler alert, I won't reveal the plot. But he is forced to use almost-forgotten skills he learned as a young man in Dublin. He was an assassin for the Irish Republican Army during the War of Independence.

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