

David McDonnell

Story & Historic Topics

“An Hour of Irish Storytelling” OR ***“The Art of Storytelling and Some Irish Tales”***: I’ve traveled the U.S. and Ireland telling Irish tales as an American seanchí. Many of these are my original tales. Others are my takes and variations of old tales. Still others are covers of other storytellers (and I always credit the originators). I’ve often preceded these stories with a brief history of the Irish seanchí, including how they preserved Irish history and folklore, as well as entertained people in the pre-electronic age. A wee bit of Irish history and culture is buried in the stories, as a disguised learning technique, as is more than a wee bit of my humor.

“Why The Great Hunger?”, which I’ve subtitled ***“Why Are There So Many Irish-Americans?”***: While this topic includes stories which took place during the Great Hunger, the focus is on the conditions in Ireland which led up to it. The cycle of Irish rebellions and English/British confiscation of clan lands, the pushing of the Irish into ever smaller parcels at rack rent, the incredible level of poverty, all led to the dependency of the rural Irish upon the ordinarily high yield/high protein potato. A catastrophe like the potato blight was perhaps inevitable. The audience comes away with the realization that the Hunger was not an agricultural failure (since, for example, Ireland exported food while millions starved), but rather a political/economic one forced upon them by centuries of British policy.

“The Irish War of Independence and the Ordinary Irish”: This describes how the war was fought, at least after the Easter Rising, with the flying columns and targeted assassinations with the listeners easily drawing comparisons to modern-day insurgencies. The focus on the talk, however, is on the conflicted attitudes of the ordinary Irish. While the most radical of the Irish organized the Easter Rebellion, many Irish by the early 20th Century were reasonably content with British Ireland and the Home Rule believed to be coming. (E.g., the Rising was crushed by the British army largely composed of Irish men on leave in Dublin). But public opinion and attitudes changed dramatically with the harsh treatment of the Rising participants and later rebels, and the atrocities of the Black and Tans. This a huge topic for a one-hour talk, but if time permits, I also talk about the Truce and the north/south division of Ireland. The overall topic is timely in that we are in the midst of the 100th anniversary of the rebellion. (Note, I’ve also done a more targeted program, entitled ***“The Easter Rising and the Ordinary Irish”***, focusing on the single week of the Rising as well as the attitudes and participation of the ordinary Irish.)

“Some Old Irish Legends”: I have a repertoire of some old Irish legends, including those from the Ulster Cycle, Fenian Cycle, Mythological Cycle and others. These tales are over a thousand years old, yet the themes are timeless. I use 21st Century vernacular, and some wit, to make these tales entertaining to a modern audience. My favorites include The Red Hand of Ulster, the Children of Lir, The Legend of Knockmany, Bricriú’s Feast, and Ancient Hurling at Cúnga.

“Celtic Mythology”: I also have a repertoire of stories with a mythology theme. Most of these are original stories but some my takes on old legends. These stories generally include a mythological character, such as a leprechaun, pooka, witch, or devils. My favorite ones, often told to children, deal with the Celtic Samhain which, as its practices are described through a story, the audience begins to recognize as a lot like modern Halloween.

“True Irish Stories (or at least True Irish Legends)”: Many of my stories are non-fictional accounts of Irish people and historical events. Some of these include historical figures (some famous some infamous). Other stories fall in the “truth is stranger than fiction” category (such as the groom who was murdered on his wedding night by his father-in-law). Still others deal with responses to historical events, such as the Irish hedge schools. The “True Legend” stories are about events in the lives of real people (such as St. Patrick and St. Brendan) which may or may not have actually happened.

“Get In Touch With Your Irish Roots”: This talk is a broad overview of Irish history and culture. The Irish way of life during the clan era was somewhat baffling to the English during their conquest and governance of Ireland, and it can be baffling to modern Americans. Topics will include the migration of Celtic tribes from the European continent to the British Isles, the organization of the clans, the influences the Vikings, Normans and English, the conquest and subjugation of the Irish by the English, and similar topics. We’ll also touch on Irish naming practices and why nearly every Irish surname identifies the clan of origination.

“Ireland North and South”: This is a discussion of the north-south division of Ireland, including the demographics, politics, and economics of the North in the 20th Century and earlier, the violence of the Troubles during the 1960s and beyond, the peace and fragile resolution of the Troubles. This leads into the fascinating question of what happens to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with United Kingdom’s Brexit from the European Union.

“True Stories from the Great Hunger”: These are lesser-known true stories from Ireland’s great famine. Stories include the Swinford Workhouse, roads to nowhere, Doolough Pass, Lord Bingham’s evictions, and the Irish orphan girls sent to Australia, the coffin ships (including **“Canada’s Worst Summer Ever”**)

“Stories For The Wee One”: I have a repertoire of stories for children which I’ve told at festival children’s areas, libraries, and other gatherings. There are warriors, adventure, pookas, zombies, witches and the like in the stories, all in a Celtic setting. I try to include a bit of history and Irish culture in the stories as another form of “disguised learning”. Depending upon the stories and the audience, I often have the children act out the stories as I tell them.