

## A Storytelling Visit to Dublin and Waterford, April 2005



... when pigs had wings ..

“Once upon a time when pigs had wings and camels could fly” is the way I begin one of my favourite stories. When I saw this statue, an advertisement for a charity, upon arrival at the Dublin Airport to begin a long anticipated visit to Ireland, it seemed I might have just have landed in a fairy tale.

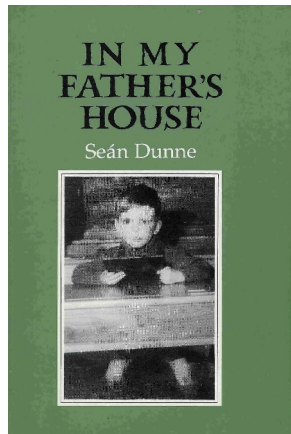
This journey to tell and hear stories in Ireland, and to see the landscape where so many of the stories I love originated, really did begin “a long, long time ago.” I live in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, where I moved in 1979 to work as a regional administrator with the public library services of Newfoundland, until resigning in 2001 to devote more time to storytelling. As a librarian, I met many Newfoundland writers, including the late Al Pittman, who in 1985, with others including Rex Brown, started the March Hare, an annual celebration of poetry and music. I was recruited in 1995 to tell stories at the first “The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party,” a March Hare program for children, and have been connected with it since that time. In the past few years, a number of poets from Ireland have been invited to read their work at the March Hare, including John Ennis, chair of the Humanities Department at the Waterford Institute of Technology, who has been working with the March Hare committee to strengthen the links between Waterford and Newfoundland.

Through this connection, Waterford journalist and storyteller, Liam Murphy, came to the March Hare in 2003. My husband and I played host to Liam, and it was intended that I should go to Waterford to tell stories during their annual Sean Dunne Literary Festival, in exchange, but as the original proposal for funding from the Newfoundland side got lost in the works and I fell seriously ill in February 2004, I had to postpone accepting until 2005. In April 2004, the day after I came home from the hospital, Rex Brown called to tell me that I had one week to apply for a Canada Council travel grant. Somehow, I managed to complete and mail the application before the deadline, and to my delight, a letter arrived in August advising that the application had been approved and a check was in the mail. Now I had a wonderful incentive to



Liam Murphy in mid story  
at Anne & Brendan Farrell’s

work on rebuilding my strength and spirit after my illness. What storyteller does not dream of visiting Ireland?



Sean Dunne Autobiography

The Sean Dunne Literary Festival (<http://www.seandunne.com>), now in its 9th year of operation in 2005, was founded to honour Waterford writer Sean Dunne, who died in 1995 at the age of 39. It includes public readings and writing competitions in various categories. The storytelling component was added recently as an additional activity for school-aged children. In preparation, I obtained several of Sean Dunne's books: his autobiography of life growing up in Waterford, *In my Father's House*, and several anthologies of poetry and other literature. *The Ireland Anthology* is an especially good place for anyone to travel into the richness of Irish literature.

In the Fall of 2004, my husband and I hosted storyteller, Karen Gummo of Calgary, for the TD Canadian Children's Book Week tour. I had done this tour myself in 2003, and had already met Karen at Storytellers of Canada conferences. Karen had just hosted an event in Calgary on Irish myth and folklore with Miceal Ross, from Dublin. In January, she emailed me, urging me to look up Miceal if I were in Dublin. I was originally going only to Waterford, but by now my husband had decided to come along and make a holiday of it, and we discussed spending several days in Dublin as well, so I emailed my Sean Dunne Festival contacts to see if they knew Miceal. Within a day or two, I received an e-mail directly from Miceal, inviting me to tell at the Dublin Yarnspinners' monthly session the week before the Sean Dunne. Fortunately, I had not yet paid for my ticket and was able to change date and destination at no cost..



My excellent host, Miceal Ross, by the Lia Fail - "The Stone of Destiny" - at Tara

Before this invitation arrived, I had been investigating how I might get to see Tara and Newgrange, the ancient historic sites north of Dublin in the Boyne Valley, or Glendalough, south of Dublin in the Wicklow Hills, both places to stir the imagination of any storyteller. Before I knew it, I was in Dublin, and Miceal was driving me through the Boyne Valley to see Tara and the Lia Fail - the Stone of Destiny, which is said to roar when a true king places his foot upon it - and Newgrange, a reconstruction upon the site of one of the best-preserved passage graves in Western Europe. On the guided tour, you see a demonstration of how the light of the sun enters the inner chamber at the winter solstice. After a full, full day of stories, and a neverending flow of

invectives heaved by Miceal at the other Irish drivers and the horrible traffic, we arrived back in Dublin late and just made it to the Teacher's Club for the Dublin Yarnspinnners Session. The Teachers' Club is in a row of elegant buildings on Parnell Square, the site of the Garden of Remembrance, with its large statue portraying *The Children of Lir*, one of the *Three Great Sorrows of Irish Storytelling*, and required viewing for any storyteller visiting Dublin. I told *Ti-Jean and the Golden Phoenix* a Quebec folktale collected by Marius Barbeau; a favourite ghost story from Japan, *Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi*, which now includes the tale of our visit to the temple on the site in Shimonoseki where the legend originated, and an encounter with a survivor of the Hiroshima bomb; and, *The Giant who had no heart in his body*, from the collection of Asbjornson and Moe. I like to tell Norse myths and folktales because I am lucky enough to live only 5 hours drive from L'Anse aux Meadows, site of the Norse settlement of 1000 AD, discovered by Helge Ingstad, and conjectured to be that of Leif Erikson as described in the Vinland saga. Besides, Miceal had told me the group liked stories about giants. I heard a number of interesting stories from members of the Yarnspinnners including a wonderful, whimsical compilation of stories about "collecting and maintaining holes, told by a fine storyteller named Aideen. I have ordered a CD copy of the stories of Ted Russell to send to Miceal so that he can play Russell's classic, "Stealing the Holes" for Aideen. Miceal told several true stories including a meeting with three remarkable women at a Toastmasters Meeting. There were approximately 50 people in the audience, and I thanked Canada Council publicly for making the visit possible, even though it had not been in the original proposal.



At the statue of *The Children of Lir* - one of the 3 great sorrows of Irish Storytelling

As we crossed the Liffey River, I recalled St. Patrick's legendary advice in *The Peddler of Ballaghadereen*, a beautiful story collected by Ruth Sawyer: "Peddler of Ballaghadereen, take the bridge that spans the Liffey, and there you will hear the words that you were meant to hear." I am sure that I, too, heard many words I was meant to hear when I crossed that bridge.

I was staying with Miceal in Monkstown and we took a walk along the waterfront where you could see Joyce's Tower nearby. We also drove around Dalkey, Sandycove, and Dun Laoghrie, and stopped to visit the Tower.

The next day, Miceal and I collected Elinor Kapp, a semi-retired psychiatrist and storyteller living in Cardiff, coincidentally in Dublin for a psychiatry conference. He had decided, and rightly so, that two storytellers named Elinor, spelled with an “i” ought to meet one another. He took us sightseeing in the Dublin and Wicklow hills, with running commentary of stories attached to each place we passed, including a tale of the Dublin Hellfire Club - said to have been located in an old hunting lodge built in 1725 by William Conolly, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons - a tale of a certain gentleman in black who wandered in from a stormy night to play cards with the assembly. When, a player dropped a card under the table, he noticed that the visitor had a cloven hoof. Once discovered, of course, the devil disappeared in a ball of flame. Doesn't he usually? I was amused to hear this story later, with embellishment and drama, on a guided tour at Castletown House, Speaker Connolly's estate at Celbridge, outside Dublin. By now, the devil had accepted an invitation, made at the Hellfire Club, to play cards at the house, and in the salon, we were shown a mirror that had cracked upon his subsequent exposure, and flight, and could not be mended.



Two Elinors and one Miceal at Glendalough with St. Kevin's "kitchen" in the background

With Miceal, and Elinor Kapp, we collected my husband at the airport, and headed toward Waterford. The arrangement was to take us all to see Glendalough, then deliver my husband and me to Liam Murphy at the Lord Bagenal pub in Leighlinbridge, where we would all have supper. Liam would drive us the rest of the way to Waterford.

Glendalough - The Glen of the Two Lakes, in Irish - is the site of the monastery founded by St. Kevin in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and the site of a legend of St. Kevin, in which a blackbird laid an egg in the saint's hand as he stood in a contemplative state. Rather than disturb it, St. Kevin remained, as described in the poem by Seamus Heaney, "in the sun and rain for weeks until the young are hatched and fledged and flown."

After supper, Miceal and Elinor Kapp returned to Dublin, and Liam, my husband, and I headed south where we were to stay with Anne and Brendan Farrell in Ballycahane, Port Law, about 15 kms outside Waterford. Anne and Liam have a storytelling partnership called Cuala Verbal Arts, and they had done the organizing for the schools I was to visit. I had Sunday to relax and prepare for the five days of school visits in Waterford and other festival activities. Brendan and Anne took us for a Sunday

pub lunch and a stroll on the beach at Stradbally. As we watched the surf rolling in, Anne told me a story about a mysterious stranger who comes ashore on horse made of sea foam.

Aside from telling the students a little about Sean Dunne and the reason for the festival, I did not really have to do anything more complicated than just to tell stories to entertain, and answer questions about Newfoundland, Canada and storytelling, itself, which is not as well known in modern Irish schools as one might have thought. In most classes we talked a little about legends and stories and heroes and where they come from.



Students at Scoil Lorcain

Irish children wear uniforms, and the classrooms are formal in ways I remember from my own childhood - desks fastened to the floor, two and three boys to a desk. There were about 25 students per class.

“Department” - another word from my childhood - was not a problem.

The children were all polite and listened attentively. Some teachers seemed worried when students began to laugh in response to the funny parts in the stories, but eventually, even the teachers joined in, and I

believe a good time was had by all. Children that age enjoy long wonder tales with lots of monsters, giants, heroics, humour and gore, so I used more Ti-Jean stories, and several ghost stories, and horror stories, like “Mr. Fox” and “It was a Dark and Stormy Night.” The teachers commented on how long the students sat still and how attentively they listened. You really can’t beat those old stories. Anne was telling stories in the same schools, but to younger groups. The only disadvantage was that I didn’t get to see her in action with the kids. My husband went to her last session and enjoyed himself. However, over the ten days we spent together, we had lots of time to share stories and our experiences working in schools.

Four of the five schools I visited were boys’ schools and I was with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> formers, boys of about 10 or 11, the age I work with in Corner Brook for the *Learning through the Arts* program. The boys’ schools were St. Paul’s, Scoil Lorcáin, which Sean Dunne attended, St. Declans, and Mount Sion, founded by Brother Rice of the Christian Brothers in 1805. At Saint Saviour’s, the only co-ed school, the



At Scoil Lorcáin, with principal Harry Flynn in front of the plaque honouring Sean Dunne



John Ennis on the left, with Harry Flynn, Mayor Seamus Ryan and Conor Nolan, Arts Councillor for Waterford and the 3 young winners from Scoil Lorcan

children were brought into an attractive library with casual seating, and the atmosphere was quite relaxed.

In the evenings there were other activities attached to the Festival: two theatrical offerings at the Garter Lane Theatre, a dinner at the Waterford Institute of Technology in honour of the Newfoundland guests, a screening of the Canadian film, “The Republic of Love,” and the Literary

Competition Award Ceremony at the beautiful Waterford City Hall, a Georgian building designed by John Roberts in 1788 as the city exchange. The Friday night Award presentation was impressive in the enormous Georgian salon of City Hall. There were a variety of prize categories ranging from national to local, and principal Harry Flynn was there on behalf of the students from Scoil Lorcaín, which has a special category all its own.



With Chuck Kruger and a Guinness in the Munster Bar



Grace Wells and John Ennis

Friday afternoon at the Waterford Public Library, we attended a reading by Newfoundland poet, Carmelita McGrath. Saturday, I enjoyed hearing Grace Wells, a poet and novelist living on Sliabh na mBan, in County Tipperary. Over lunch, Grace gave me a copy of *Gyr Falcon*, her novel for young adults, which I read with pleasure later in my journey. I also enjoyed a chat with another of the Saturday

presenters, Chuck Kruger, organizer of the Cape Clear Island Storytelling Festival.

On Sunday, Anne and Brendan took us sight-seeing around Dungarvan and Ardmore on the south coast, where we saw the Round Tower (12<sup>th</sup> century), St. Declan’s Oratory (portions from 5<sup>th</sup> Century)



Anne & Brendan at the hermitage by St. Declan’s Well

and adjoining cathedral (10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>) with its well-preserved sculptures. In the graveyard surrounding the church was the gravestone of a more modern Declan, a man killed in the Civil War in 1921. We walked to St. Declan's well on the lower end of St. Declan's Way, which leads in the other direction all the way to Mount Cashel. This beautiful trail overlooking the sea led through banks of violets and primroses. We drank water from the well, then went for tea and goodies in a pleasant restaurant in Ardmore. We also drove through a small section of one of the Gaeltach, or Irish-speaking sections of the country, at Helvick Head.



Ray McGrath tells *The Dream of Aengus Og*

On Monday, while they prepared for a “hooley” at their house, Anne and Brendan ordered us off to Kilkenny on the train for a day trip, which we enjoyed very much, especially the excellent tour of Kilkenny Castle. That night, the guests included Liam Murphy and his wife, Margaret, relatives, neighbours, Connor Nolan, the Arts Councillor, Declan Foley, the principal from



Declan Foley

Mount Sion, and Ray McGrath, an historian/folklorist who has been working with people in eastern Newfoundland to establish a permanent Sea Week Festival “twinning” between the Waterford/Wexford regions of Ireland and Newfoundland and Labrador. There were lots of songs and stories: Liam told Oscar Wilde’s “The Rose and the Nightingale,” Brendan, who plays in a drum corps, joined Anne as she told “The Pool of Stars,” the story of a young drummer boy who warns the rebels of a British ambush. He also sang *Wild Rover* with his brother, Willie, on guitar. Ray told a lovely version of “The Dream of Aengus Og.” Declan contributed a tune on the accordion. I told a Persian story, “The Lemon Princess”, a personal favorite discovered in *The Book of Magical Tales* by Jane Ray and Margaret Mayo published by Doubleday Canada. And of course, there was a feast, a grand feast, with many dishes familiar to most Newfoundlanders. Instead of moose, however, there was venison shot by Brendan in the forest nearby and we took venison sandwiches on the train to Dublin the next day for two more days of sightseeing before leaving Ireland.

I would be an uncivil guest, indeed, if I did not attest to the well-earned fame of Irish hospitality. In ancient times, under Brehon Law, officials were appointed to provide hospitality throughout the land

in special houses. Here, open doors faced all roads and no one was allowed to pass unentertained. A light burned all night; a full cauldron was always boiling on the fire. Everyone was welcome, but the hospitality due to poets and bards was the most complex, and based upon rank. So important were these laws of hospitality, that in the time of the Tuath De Dannan, in the legend of *Nuada of the Silver Arm*, a story I like to tell, King Bres is overthrown because he fails to observe these laws. As the story goes, “Bres did not grease the knives” of visiting poets” ... “their breath did not smell of ale at the banquet.” When the famous poet, Cairbre, failed to receive the expected hospitality from Bres, he wrote a satirical poem against him, which fanned the flames of rebellion amongst his unhappy people and led to his downfall. As a teller even of simple fireside tales, may I state that my knife was well-greased, and my breath stank of as much ale as age and sense permitted. The lights burned late; cauldrons were filled to the brim; my hosts were helpful beyond measure. Their generosity in terms of time and gasoline expended by Miceal, Anne and Brendan, and Liam and his wife Margaret, in ensuring that I saw as much as possible in the allotted time, was the kindest of gifts.



Telling tales, myself, at a real Irish Fireside

I am most grateful to the Canada Council for supporting me in this journey, my first adventure in storytelling outside Canada. Thanks are due also to Conor Nolan and the Waterford City Council, the Dublin Yarnspinners, Miceal and Susan Ross, Anne and Brendan Farrell, Liam and Margaret Murphy and Cuala Verbal Arts, John Ennis and The March Hare.



Brendan adds the drums to great effect in Anne’s story of “The Pool of Stars”