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# MOHAWK VALLEY IRISH CULTURAL EVENTS NEWSLETTER

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## An Gorta Mór, or The Great Hunger

*The Great American Irish Festival has chosen as its theme for 2007 “An Gorta Mór,” or the Great Hunger, to commemorate the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Black '47, the worst year of the Irish potato famine. In keeping with that theme, the Mohawk Valley Irish Cultural Events Newsletter presents a three-part series offering a very brief summary of the tragic events that decimated the Irish population. Those interested in learning more about the famine are encouraged to read the seminal book on the subject, The Great Hunger by Cecil Woodham-Smith.*

The Irish population had exploded in the first half of the nineteenth century, reaching about 8.5 million by 1845. Due to the restrictive British Penal Laws, Irish peasants were forced to live on farms so small they could barely grow enough food to support a family. Potatoes, which yielded the greatest amount of food per acre, became the only viable crop and the population became almost totally dependent on the potato as a source of food and income. The type of potato most favored was the “Aran Banner,” a large variety brought from the Americas. Unfortunately, this particular strain proved to be highly susceptible to a type of fungus commonly known as blight. Compounding the potential for disaster was the fact that only four types of potato were brought from North America, and the lack of genetic diversity made it possible for a single water mold variant to have much more devastating consequences than it might otherwise have had. This single-crop dependency was part of a confluence of circumstances (which also included natural causes and injudicious government policies) that led to the events that became known as the Great Hunger or, in Gaelic, An Gorta Mór.

When the potato crop of 1845 was harvested, farmers cutting into the potatoes found that a water mold had turned the entire crop into a soggy and inedible mess. It soon became clear that, because of the failed harvest of a crop upon which the nation had come to rely so heavily, famine was imminent. The people of Ireland struggled through the first year of the famine with difficulty and suffering, but with no reported deaths attributed to the famine and, throughout the summer of 1846, maintained high hopes for a good potato harvest. But the cool, moist spring and summer had been ideal for the spread of blight and, although at first the crop appeared healthy, by harvest time the results of the blight were devastating, destroying nearly every potato in Ireland. Reserve stores were quickly depleted and, making matters worse, the winter of 1846-47 became the worst in the country's history, with one blizzard after another burying homes in snow. Even a blight-free harvest in 1847 would not be enough to forestall the horrendous consequences.

The blight did not strike the potato crop in 1847, but most families had been forced to eat their few seed potatoes and the overall crop was again disastrously low, less than a quarter of a normal harvest. With a failure of the potato crop for three consecutive years, the results were predictably catastrophic. Estimates of total deaths range from 500,000 to 1.5 million (12% of the total population), some from outright starvation, even more from epidemics of typhoid fever, cholera, and dysentery. The dead were buried without coffins just a few inches below the soil, to be dug up by starving animals. In some houses, bodies remained for weeks among the living who were too weak to move them outside. In other places, large trenches were dug and bodies unceremoniously dumped into these unmarked mass graves. Entire families, who had been among the hundreds of thousands evicted for their inability to pay rent, simply laid down along the roadside and died. Some landlords, instead of evicting, loaded their tenants aboard what became known as “coffin ships” bound for other countries. Additional hundreds of these emigrants, malnourished and riddled with fever, died during these passages.

It must also be noted that many estates did provide help for their tenants, with reduced rents and the provision of soup kitchens, in some cases bankrupting themselves in the process. Relief works were also initiated, although much of this relief was ineffectual. Workers were paid a pittance to build roads that went nowhere, or were employed to fill in valleys or flatten hills. Many workers died before their wages arrived at the end of each week. Others were forced to eat what little food the family had –and watch their children go without – just to maintain enough strength to work.

*Next month - British Government Action and Inaction*

## **Community Marks Passing of Renowned Irish Dance Teacher**

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, famed Irish dance teacher Patrick Butler of the Butler School of Traditional Irish Dance, succumbed to cancer at age 65. Patrick, the Dublin-born son of Mae Butler -- founder of the Butler academy in Dublin over 60 years ago -- and noted musician and dance choreographer Paddy Butler, was considered a pioneer of modern Irish dancing in North America. Beginning in Toronto, he became a teacher of such renown that he started offering classes in many American cities; eventually bringing the Butler Academy to central New York, with the main academy in Syracuse, and 'satellite schools' in several other cities. He leaves an impressive list of accomplishments -- he is the retired undefeated Canadian Champion Dancer, and is the undefeated North American Champion Dancer. He once danced before President John F. Kennedy and the queen of England. He has taught numerous champion dancers ranging in ages from ten years and up. Many of his former students have become very successful Irish Dance teachers in Central New York.

In 2000, Patrick created a dance called "The Wings of Ireland" as a tribute to his father. It involved 12 dancers, and Patrick imagined it beginning in a fog, with the young women rising in triumph from the floor. On Saturday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, ten days after Patrick's passing, a group of dancers from his school -- including ten of the originals -- performed "The Wings of Ireland" at the Hotel Syracuse for the last time. After this last dance, "The Wings of Ireland" was retired.

"He was a great teacher, almost like a second father," said Pattie Sheehan Malinowski, who began dancing for Patrick as a 4-year-old and is now director of the Butler-Sheehan Academy of Irish Dance in Syracuse. "He taught us to be strong. He taught us we had to be aggressive. He taught us you had to go out and attack the stage in the same way that you attack life."

*Thanks to the many people who sent us information on Mr. Butler's life and death, and to Syracuse Post-Standard columnist Sean Kirst for contributions lifted from his blog.*

## **Passing of the Shillelagh takes place at Stanley Theatre**

On March 6th, 2007, William Barry Sr. of Whitesboro officially took the helm as the 2007 St. Patrick's Day Parade Grand Marshal. Mr. Barry has a long history of involvement in the community and Irish interests. His large family and about 400 of his closest friends were on hand to witness the "Passing of the Shillelagh" at the Stanley Theatre.



## **Festival to organize parade in 2008 and beyond**

2007 will mark the last year of the parade being organized by the Cable Cares Club. After consultation with Utica Mayor Tim Julian and a variety of other key people, it was decided that the Great American Irish Festival will be the organizer and presenter of the parade starting in 2008. The festival commended tireless coordinator Al Pulaski and his crew for their fine work over the years in building the Utica parade to the 3rd largest in NYS.

## Celtic Radio on the Internet - *contributed by Mark Sisti*

It has long been a sore subject with me that the closest PBS radio station chooses, for reasons that escape me, not to run the nation's top Irish radio program, *Thistle and Shamrock*. This decision makes little sense to me, since virtually every pledge drive on their TV affiliate is replete with Irish programs – whether “Celtic Women,” “Irish Tenors,” “Riverdance,” etc. – which would suggest that they understand the strength of their Irish audience. Fortunately, in this internet age we are not at the mercy of the vagaries of radio station program directors. These days all it takes to get your fill of any style of Irish music is an internet connection, which will take you to hundreds of web radio stations that featuring nothing but Irish music. The problem is, with so many from which to choose, where do you start? A little judicious searching and googling will give you more sites than you could ever listen to, but here are just a few to get you started. (We'd like to thank Kevin Dowling, who made the ultimate sacrifice of listening to hours of Irish music to contribute information for this article.)

You could do worse than to start your journey at [www.live365.com](http://www.live365.com). While many of the sites linked with Live365 have their own websites, they can all be played from the Live365 site. This station has 52 sites listed under its Celtic category, but that shouldn't be too daunting, since many of them can be ignored for various reasons. For example, one called “Accordion Radio” broadcasts 100% accordion music and can be passed over because much of what is played is not Celtic and also because, well, it broadcasts 100% accordion music. For the traditionalist, you might start with the link called simply “Celtic,” which broadcasts some terrific traditional Celtic music, although a little too New Age for my tastes. Live at McSorley's, on the other hands, is probably the station I end up listening to the most, with great traditional tunes by the likes of the Bothy Band, Danu and the Chieftains. Or your taste may run towards Radio Rebel Gael. Or the Celtic Punk of Shite'N'Onions. Or Celtic Christian Radio. Whatever your style, you'll find it here.

Highlander Radio, ([www.celticradio.net](http://www.celticradio.net)) out of Boston, is an award winning internet radio station broadcasting a wide range of Celtic Music 24 hours a day and they boast a nice balance of tunes, although for rock enthusiasts, the selection doesn't get much heavier than The Elders or Wolfestone. A nice feature of this site is a database of over 10,000 songs from which to make a request, either on line or by calling in.

A relative new entry into the fray is [www accuradio.com](http://www accuradio.com), which has several substations featuring the various subgenres that make up Celtic music, including Celtic Rock (which features familiar artists like Black 47 and The Fenians, but will also introduce you to artists you may not have heard before); Female Artists; Male Artists; progressive (Loreena McKennit, Enya, etc.) and traditional.

[www.liveireland.com](http://www.liveireland.com), broadcast from Dublin, offers two channels: channel one, which is their folk and traditional channel, and channel two, contemporary. Some may quibble with their definition of contemporary. I think it would be more accurate to say this channel plays contemporary Irish *artists* (The Corrs, U2 etc.) more than what I would consider contemporary Irish *music* (not all music that is Irish is Irish music. Does that make sense?) but as always, that's a matter of personal taste and, hey, I don't mind listening to Van Morrison. Also, if they have a playlist, which is a useful feature found on most internet radio sites, I haven't been able to find it. On the other hand, LiveIreland.com has some interesting podcasts available and very, very cool live webcams from various sites in Dublin, although, surprisingly, not from some of the more colorful sites like the Temple Bar area. On second thought, maybe that's not so surprising. I will warn you, I've had occasional trouble getting some of their links to work, but that may have been as much a problem with my computer as with the site.

Any site where your cursor is a pint of Guinness is worth checking out, so head to [www.paddyrock.com](http://www.paddyrock.com) to get your fill of Celtic Rock and Punk. As you might expect, you'll get a lot of Flogging Molly and Dropkick

Murphys here, but you'll also find bands on the (for want of a better word) lighter side, like Enter The Haggis and The Elders.

On the more traditional end of the spectrum [www.midwestirishradio.com](http://www.midwestirishradio.com) broadcasts out of the west of Ireland and presents Irish ballads, folk, traditional and dance music, with old-style Ceili shows broadcast regularly, bilingual presentations and (for those so inclined) Mass broadcast from a different church every Sunday. While I personally could do without the American country tunes that sneak in now and then, the homely atmosphere of the station makes you feel like you're back in Mayo.

As should be clear by now, whatever your tastes in Irish or Celtic music, chances are you'll have little problem finding it. And if you're so inclined, feel free to support these stations, since that's what will keep them on the air. Or the web.

## **Celtic Encore: An Evening Celebrating Celtic Music and Dance**

On Saturday, April 28<sup>th</sup>, the Capitol Theater will host "**Celtic Evening 2,**" the highly anticipated sequel to "A Celtic Evening" presented in April 2005. The show will feature some of central NY's finest musicians and dancers, including vocalists, Irish step dancers, Scottish highland dancers, Irish fiddlers, Scottish country dancers, an uilleann piper, an Irish accordion player, a Celtic mandolin player, an Irish folk group, a highland drum salute, the Comhaltas musicians, and the Mohawk Valley Frasers Pipes and Drums.

As in 2005, the Mohawk Valley Frasers are producing and directing the show. "The Celtic community abounds in talent," said Jim Clough, pipe major of the Frasers. "There is a lot from which to choose. We have no problem creating a full evening of entertainment."

World-class piper Andrew Douglas will return and be doubly featured with performances in both acts of what is scheduled to be an hour and a half of top-flight entertainment. Douglas, a member of the several-time world champion Simon Fraser University Pipe Band in Vancouver, contributed a show-stopping performance in 2005, when he received standing ovations and obliged the audience with an impromptu encore. Douglas grew up in Syracuse and, as a boy, piped with Mohawk Valley Frasers.

The first "Celtic Evening" played to a full house and brought rave reviews, calling it "electrifying" and "nothing short of spectacular." Barbara Tewksbury, a geology professor at Hamilton College and a piper with the Frasers, directed that first performance, and will again direct and host this year's production. Recognizing a good thing when she sees it, she promises the same fast-paced format. "It will be non-stop entertainment," said Tewksbury. "The best from 2005 will return with fresh material, and the enormous success of that evening has allowed us to recruit a few additional acts of the highest caliber. It helps that an appreciative audience made the night so special to the entertainers; the audience's warmth was wonderfully energizing to the performers." Also returning from the 2005 performance, Ray Tucker of the Capitol will again coordinate the lighting, staging, and sound.



As with the first "Celtic Evening," all proceeds will benefit the Capitol Theatre and the Mohawk Valley Frasers Celtic Arts scholarships. Tickets are \$15 for adults (\$12 in advance), \$10 for students/seniors (\$8 in advance) and \$5 for children 12 and under (\$4 in advance), and can be purchased at the Capitol Theatre (either at ticket window or by calling 337-6453), or at the door on the night of the performance.

*Book Review:*  
**“Paula Spencer”**  
*By Mark Sisti*

I confess: I am an unabashed fan of Roddy Doyle. There are, of course, some Doyle books that are better than others, but there is not one that isn't very, very good. Such is the case with “Paula Spencer,” the sequel to his devastatingly brilliant “The Woman Who Walked Into Doors.” It's not quite as good as its predecessor (few books are) but it is very, very good.

No one who read “The Woman Who Walked Into Doors” could possibly forget Paula Spencer, whose journey through spousal abuse and alcoholism was mesmerizing. Doyle's new novel finds her several years after the events in the first book. Paula, not for the first time, has stopped drinking, and “Paula Spencer” is the story of her first year of sobriety. Actually, that's not true: it's the story of each day along the way to what she hopes is a life of sobriety. This time is different, she insists, this time it's for good. She'll never drink again. No one believes it, of course, not her children, not her sisters; even Paula, at times, has her doubts. It's not an easy road, and as Doyle writes, “the real work starts when she opens her eyes in the morning. It never stops.” Doyle's prose carries us along as if we were living each day with her. When the story begins, she is numbering her sobriety in terms of days; by the close of the book, a year has gone by almost without notice and she has stopped thinking about how long it has been since she had a drink. But the book is so much more than a struggle against alcoholism.

Paula is trying (clumsily and with varying degrees of success) to reconnect with her children, all of whom carry the scars of a tainted childhood. The oldest daughter, Nicola, who has had to be more parent than daughter, deals with her mother's struggles much the same way as Paula deals with her alcoholic daughter Leanne, with suspicion and a lack of trust. John Paul is a recovering heroin addict whose recovery from addiction was accomplished partly by distancing himself from his mother. The youngest, John, was affected the least by his mother's problems and represents Paula's hope for the future. Paula sees herself most clearly in Leanne, who is struggling with her own alcoholism, as Doyle describes one confrontation: “The look in the eyes that came straight at Paula, the anger and panic, terror, the whole lot coming at her. It was Paula looking straight back at Paula.”

Paula is trying to be the parent she was not able to be while her children were growing up, knowing full well it may be too late, but making the attempt anyway. As is the case with her climb towards sobriety, there are times when she knows it would be easier to just give in but she refuses to allow herself that luxury.

As with most of Doyle's books, Dublin is a major part of the novel, but it's a changed and changing Dublin. However, unlike many Dubliners, Paula is fascinated by the changes and embraces them, even as she struggles to fit in with them. The new city reflects the new life Paula is trying to build and it fills her with excitement and anticipation, but also with trepidation. Much like Dublin, Paula is reinventing herself, redefining herself. To use an odious new age phrase, Paula is trying to find herself, as evidenced by a scene where she Googles her name. But for Paula, it's isn't a question of trying to rebuild her life, it is more a determination to (perhaps for the first time) live her life.

There is, simply put, no one alive who writes like Roddy Doyle. The perfectly chosen phrases reflect the workings of Paula's mind, confused, scattered, yet at the same time strong and brutally honest, and the dialogue is not like reading at all, but like eavesdropping on someone in a Dublin pub. There is no morose sentimentality at play here, instead there is humanity and humor. Even the title is perfect. Whereas “The Woman Who Walked Into Doors” suggests a victim, “Paula Spencer” is a portrait of a complete person, or at least of a person on the way to completion.

How does it turn out? Does Leanne recover? What about Carmel's cancer? How does Paula's new relationship work out? Your guess is as good as anyone's. In Doyle novels, as in life, there is no closure. What we are sure of, however, is that Paula is a survivor, and we suspect she'll be, in her own words, “just grand.”



## RANDOM RAMBLINGS

✚ **Winning Poster Selected for 2007 Festival** As reported in our February issue, MVCC graphics design students had been tasked with creating a “Theme Graphic” for the 2007 Great American Irish Festival, marking the second time the GAIF committee has turned to the school’s Professional Practice in Graphic Design program for help in creating a recognizable image for the festival. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, GAIF Director Matt Sullivan announced the winning entrant in the popular competition: She’s Jaime Shepard, a 1998 RFA graduate, now living in Barneveld. “I am very excited and pleased to have my design picked,” said Ms. Shepard, who will graduate in May with an AAS in Graphic Design and plans on pursuing her Bachelor’s Degree in this field from Empire State College. Her design, pictured here, features the Blessed Trinity symbol representing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of religious teachings which are embedded in the Irish culture. Within each of the arcs of the Blessed Trinity are the cultural aspects of Irish music and dance. The third artistic element is the festival’s logo, which was created by MVCC graduate Adrienne Sangastiano in the spring of 2004. “We were very, very impressed with the work done by the students,” said Sullivan.



✚ **New Acts Added for 2007 Festival** If the Great American Irish Festival lineup announced in February wasn’t impressive enough, your hard-working committee has added some world-class acts to this year’s three day extravaganza. Joining the already stellar cast will be three additional acts. Making a much-anticipated return to the festival will be the phenomenal **Rathkeltaír**. Founding member Neil Anderson is back in the states after being called up for a tour of duty in Iraq and the band is picking up where they left off - energizing Festival stages all over North America. Simply put, you will never see a more high-energy show than Rathkeltaír. And on the softer – and much prettier side – the festival welcomes the dulcet sounds of **The Irish Sopranos**, who, in addition to performing a set on Sunday, will also be singing Sunday morning at the festival’s first ever Gaelic Mass. Finally, rounding out the Regional Stage will be Utica trio, **Rattlin’ Bog**.

✚ **Calling all Volunteers** Claudette Johnson, Great American Irish Festival Volunteer Coordinator, needs your help. The Great American Irish Festival is expanding to three days for 2007 and she needs even more volunteers than last year, in a variety of areas. In addition to the “usual areas,” there have been some new events added this year, including a Gaelic Mass, the CW Teen Zone and the first-ever GAIF Irish Food Booth. If you would like to step up and help in any of these areas, or if you have a particular skill or specialty that might benefit the organization, she’d love to hear from you. Volunteers get free admission to the festival and a Staff shirt, and with the extended length of the festival, satisfying a minimum total commitment of 6-8 hours still allows you plenty of time to enjoy the rest of the festival. If you are interested in helping, it is important that you submit your information to the volunteer page on the GAIF web site ([www.gaif.us](http://www.gaif.us)). Important note: If you’ve already submitted anything to the volunteer page in the past couple of months, you may need to go in and re-enter it, as there was a glitch in the system that resulted in some entries to be lost in cyberspace.

✚ **Festival to be honored by Herkimer Chamber** The Herkimer County Chamber of Commerce has chosen the Great American Irish Festival as one of its three business-oriented honorees for 2007. At the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Luncheon of the chamber, to be held on April 26<sup>th</sup> at the Little Falls Best Western, the festival will be recognized as the “Promotional Event of the Year.” Congratulations to the entire GAIF organization for this well-deserved recognition.

✚ **Interested in becoming a Festival Sponsor?** If so, there’s still time to climb on board “the fastest growing Irish festival in the country.” For more information on how you or your company can get involved, contact Festival Director Matt Sullivan at [Director@gaif.us](mailto:Director@gaif.us).

**Celtic Club Calendar** Finally, here's the Irish Musical and Cultural calendar for April.

Apr 1	Syracuse Irish Session	HalfPenny Pub	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 6	Cliudan	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	5-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 7	Dady Brothers	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 7	Hair of the Dog	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	8:00 PM	\$12, res req'd
Apr 13	Donal O'Shaughnessey	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	5-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 14	Traditional Sessions	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free
Apr 14	Cassidy McCale	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 15	Syracuse Irish Session	Johnston's Bally Bay Pub	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 19	Coyote Run	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 20	Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	5-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 20	Cliudan	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 20	The McKrells	<a href="#">Night Eagle Cafe</a>	Binghamton	8:00 P.M.	\$17
Apr 21	Hair of the Dog	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	8:00 PM	\$12, res req'd
Apr 21	Poor Auld Goat	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 27	Donal O'Shaughnessey	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	5-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 27	Cherish the Ladies	<a href="#">Night Eagle Cafe</a>	Binghamton	8:00 P.M.	\$27
Apr 27	Old Friends	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9:00 PM	Free
Apr 28	Traditional Sessions	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free

That wraps it up for this month. If you have anything you want to add, feel free to contact us at [sistia@adelphia.net](mailto:sistia@adelphia.net), [bloftis@verizon.net](mailto:bloftis@verizon.net) or [marksisti@adelphia.net](mailto:marksisti@adelphia.net).