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# MOHAWK VALLEY IRISH CULTURAL EVENTS NEWSLETTER

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## The Battle of Clontarf

*The date is Good Friday, April 23. The year, 1014. The site is a coastal suburb on the northside of Dublin called Clontarf. And what occurred in the place on that date changed the course of Irish history.*

Students of Irish history are taught that Brian Boru's victory over the Viking forces at the battle of Clontarf drove the Vikings from the island, thus ending the Irish-Norse conflict. The truth is not quite that simple.

To begin with, this was not a battle pitting united Irishmen defending their homeland against the invading Vikings. The Vikings were at this point fairly well-settled in Ireland, firmly ensconced in such Norse strongholds as Dublin and Limerick. The Vikings conducted business with and paid tribute to the native Irish, although, holding the major ports, they remained in control of the lucrative trade that connected Ireland with the rest of the Viking commercial world. As one Irish chronicle put it, "There was a Norse king in every province, a Norse chief in every clan, a Norse abbot in every church, a Norse sheriff in every village, a Norse warrior in every home." Brian Boru himself in 1005 had used Viking-Irish renegades to mount raiding expeditions against the western shores of Britain, at the same time guaranteeing Viking settlers in Ireland their territories in return for their military support.



More important, the battle came about, not as a patriotic and ideological attempt to drive invaders out, but chiefly as a result of conflicts between Irish kings. Clontarf was, at its core, a battle between the forces of Brian Boru and the forces led by the King of Leinster, Máel Mórda mac Murchada, composed mainly of his own men, an army from the Isle of Man, led by Brodir, Viking mercenaries from Dublin and the Orkney Islands and warriors from the province of Ulster. And Brian Boru, for his part, employed Viking mercenaries as part of his army.

Brian Boru had ruled most of Ireland since 1002 and looked to unite the still divided island. In 997, despite an agreement with Malachi (Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill) that called for Malachi and Brian to each rule half of the country, Brian attacked Malachi, eventually forcing him to abdicate. In 1012, Máel Mórda, the king of Leinster, rose in revolt. Brian countered by arranging a series of cross-marriages, giving his daughter to Sigtrygg Silkbeard, leader of the Dublin Vikings, and himself marrying Sigtrygg's mother and Máel Mórda's sister Gormlaith (who was also, in the best soap opera fashion, Malachi's ex-wife). These complicated relationships, rather than cementing Brian's rule, may have precipitated the battle, as Gormlaith, being cast aside by Brian, incited her brother to challenge his rule. Perhaps as a result of Gormlaith's goading, Máel Mórda enlisted Sigtrygg's help and various Irish clans who were envious of Brian quickly joined them.

In 1014, Brian's army marched towards Dublin, planning to join with a force from Meath to attack the Vikings. However, as they approached, the Irishmen of Meath, commanded by ex-high king Malachi, refused to take part in the battle, reducing Brian's numbers by thousands.

That night Brian received news that the Viking forces had boarded their longships and headed out to sea. In reality, the Vikings had simply sailed out of sight, to return in the darkness in hopes of catching the Irish unprepared for the battle the next morning, knowing that the pious Brian would not expect to do battle on such a holy day as Good Friday. The following dawn found the Viking and Leinster forces arrayed on the beach, and Brian's army faced them. After several individual battles between men from both lines, the two armies engaged early in the morning.

At first the battle went the Vikings' way, but Brian's Viking mercenaries on his right slowly pushed back the forces facing them. On the left, Brodir himself led the charge and gained ground, until he met the warrior Wolf the Quarrelsome, brother of King Brian. Wolf knocked Brodir to the ground and Brodir fled to hide. This left the now leaderless Viking warriors facing the force led by Brian's son Murchad and by the afternoon Brodir's men were fleeing to their ships.

In the center, Máel Mórda's forces were hammering into Brian's lines. However the Viking leader Sigurd was slain and the Vikings quickly found themselves with both flanks failing and the beaches in front of the ships already lost. With battle now clearly going Brian's way, and the Dublin Vikings making for their ships, Malachi finally entered the fray and the battle became a rout.

The story was not ended however, and accounts of what happened next vary. Some accounts say that a small retreating Viking force accidentally stumbled upon Brian Boru resting in his tent and killed him, without even knowing who he was. Other accounts claim that Brodir from his hiding place noticed Brian praying in his tent, ran into the tent, killed him and retreated, yelling, "Now let man tell man that Brodir felled Brian." He was quickly tracked, captured and gruesomely killed by Wolf the Quarrelsome.

Clontarf stands as one of the bloodiest battles in Irish history. Of the 6,500 to 7,000 Vikings and allied forces, an estimated 6,000, including almost all the leaders, were killed. Irish losses were at least 4,000 including the High King and most of his sons. While the battle may have ended any Norse threat in Ireland – there are no records of Viking raids after 1014 – any dream of a united Ireland also ended with Brian's death. Malachi, with his barely-used troops unscathed, claimed the Irish throne once again; however, it was a fragmented island, incapable of unity. There was no man left alive able to take the place of Brian Boru.

## Utica's St. Patrick's Day Parade Does the City Proud

Marchers, musicians, dancers and vehicles of all sizes were out in force on Saturday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, as New York State's third largest St. Patrick's Day Parade, led by Grand Marshal Michael Dwyer, wended its way down Genesee Street, to the delight of tens of thousands of Irish and Irish-at-heart onlookers. The Great American Irish Festival, presenter of the parade, is pleased to announce the following parade judging winners:

### Float

- 1: Mohawk Ltd.
- 2: (tie) Leneghen Family and Fox 33 WFXV
- 3: Cornhill Neighborhood Association

### Marching Unit

- 1: New Hartford Legion Post 1376
- 2: New York Army National Guard 2nd Infantry  
108th Infantry
- 3: Johnston School of Irish Dance

### Pipe Band

- 1: Finger Lakes Pipe Band
- 2: (tie) Scotia Glenville Pipe Band and Rob Roys



JASON ROSSI / Observer-Dispatch

### Fire Department

- 1: Whitesboro Fire Department
- 2: Clinton Fire Department
- 3: Maynard Fire Department

### Vehicle

- 1: St. David's Society of Utica
- 2: (tie) Safety First Chimney  
Sweeps and Buttenschon  
Christmas Trees
- 3: Utica Safe Schools Healthy  
Students

### Tavern:

- 1: Celtic Harp/Shorty's

*Book Review:*  
**“Skippy Dies”**  
*By Mark Sisti*

Life is hard. Especially if you’re 14. Reading “Skippy Dies” by Paul Murray makes you wonder how any of us ever got through it, but it does make you remember the trip.

Daniel “Skippy” Juster is a young boy boarding at Seabrook College near Dublin who (no spoiler alert necessary) dies. Daniel is, by all appearances, an unremarkable though likable boy; he is not overly popular, but he has his circle of friends. He is not an athletic star, but he is on the swim team. Although a good student, he’s not the best in his class. But he has family issues that are hinted at and not discussed and he loves from afar a girl who attends the girls’ boarding school next door. And, as with most adolescents, he is unable to deal with the grim realities of life, escaping in his video game world (and the “game” his family plays) to the point where it blurs – in his life and in the narrative – with real life.

The bulk of the novel deals with the lead-up to Skippy’s death (told in retrospect) and the aftermath. Murray explores this scenario through a cast of characters that is huge and universally memorable. There is Ruprecht (we won’t go into his nickname), the school’s eccentric genius, who is obsessed with making the world make sense; Carl, the school’s psychopathic drug-dealer and bully; Lori, the object of Skippy’s fantasies and all-consuming devotion; Mario, the would-be ladies’ man; Dennis, the cynic. Somehow Murray manages to take each of these teenagers – whom the adults perceive as homogeneous – and make them such distinct characters we could identify them from their dialogue if the statements were unattributed. Murray perfectly captures the innocence and ignorance of youth, the madness and magic, while never forgetting the darker aspects.

There are also the occasional adults, chiefly Howard ‘The Coward’ Fallon, a 28-year-old former Seabrook student who turned to teaching after a failed career in finance. Howard is desperate to find himself and his place in life, but still irrationally blames himself and is blamed by others for an incident that crippled the school’s top athlete decades before. One could easily see Howard as representing one of the various adults Daniel could have become (“every path you take, no matter how lofty or effulgent, aches not only with the memory of what you left behind, but with the ghosts of all untaken paths, now never to be taken, running parallel”) and his obsession with a beautiful substitute teacher is clearly meant to reflect Daniel’s fanciful fixation on Lori. Howard is a decent man, though rudderless; some of the other adults are not quite so decent. But there is a fundamental disconnect between all the adults and the teenagers. There is a basic unwillingness or inability to communicate that ultimately dooms any efforts to relate.

While there is a plot – in fact, many – the book is about people, and in that respect it succeeds brilliantly. Every word sounds credible and every action seems plausible. As in real life, people who we like or admire do not always act as we would like them to act. Bad things happen to good people, and good people do bad things (or at least thoughtless things that turn out bad.)

The title – and the main character’s death in the first few pages – may seem an odd way to start a novel, but you are warned that everything in this novel is more than it appears to be, so be careful about approaching this book with any preconceptions, or judging any characters too quickly. We are given the chain of incidents that lead to Skippy’s death, but what we are not given is any easy answer.

There is so much to say about this book that this review could be pages long, but if I were asked to describe it in four words, they would be these: Un. Freakin’. Be. Lievable. Remember the name Paul Murray. This is a very special writer, and if this book is any indication, he is going to be a very important figure in Irish literature for a long time to come. His style alternates between straightforward narrative and surreal passages, between hilarious farce and heartbreaking tragedy, and shifts at odd intervals from past tense to present tense. Some readers may find this disconcerting, but none of it is accidental, and it all works. I also feel compelled to give the usual warnings of coarse language; these are teenage kids after all. A further caution: you will see in most articles about this book the word “funny.” Don’t be misled into thinking this is a lighthearted romp through Catholic school days. It is deep, profound and hauntingly poignant. It is, at turns, uplifting and utterly draining. There is a temptation to suggest that the book would have been enhanced by some judicious editing, but I would be hard-pressed to say where. Ruprecht’s meandering dissertations on physics and string theory, for example, may seem out of place, but it is this very disparity between the search for rationality in life and the inherent absurdity of life itself that is at the very core of this touching journey of discovery.

## Craobh Dugan “Tune of the Month” – Brian Boru’s March—by Skip Mansur

A thousand years is a long time, and it seems that somewhere in the last millennium the history and composer of this month’s piece have faded into the foggy dew. Some speculate that it was composed for Brian Boru’s march to the Battle of Clontarf (see article above), others say it was written centuries later. The earliest written versions date to the late 1800s; it was in the repertoire of a man whom Chicago’s Chief of Police and music collector Francis O’Neill calls the “last of the great Irish harpers,” Patrick Byrne (c.1784-1863), who was known to have made a grand performance of it at a house in Dublin in 1860\*. One source claims this tune was the second piece required to be learned by harpers in the Bardic Age. In any case, it appears to be one of the older tunes in Irish harpertoire.

Harpers were well known at the time of Brian Boru, and *genealogical-gleanings.com* states that Brian, besides enjoying the game of chess, which was popular in Ireland during this time, was an excellent harp musician. Furthermore, *The Irish Monthly* (Vol. 52, No. 618, Dec., 1924) states that Brian Boru’s harp and jewels were taken by his firstborn son Donough after his death at Clontarf. In his old age, Donough made a pilgrimage to Rome and presented his father’s crown, regalia and harp to Pope Alexander II, where it supposedly remained for nearly five centuries. In 1521 it was presented to King Henry VIII of England by Leo X in recognition of “his defence of the Seven Sacraments,” and then shortly afterward as a gift to Ulick de Burgh, the Marquess of Clanricarde in the Peerage of Ireland (an Irish Nobleman). In the 16th century Henry VIII made the harp the official symbol of colonial Ireland by putting it on Ireland’s currency.

It is unclear what became of Brian’s original instrument, however, the harp has become a symbol of peace and unity in Ireland. The Celtic harp symbol found on the Coat of Arms of Ireland (inset), as well as the presidential flag, state seals, uniforms, and even bottles of Guinness is inspired by an exquisite harp periodically on display in the long room at Trinity College, Dublin. The *Trinity College harp* (also known as *Brian Boru's Harp*) is one of only three surviving medieval wire strung [cláirseach](#), or Gaelic harps. It dates to the 14th or 15th century and bears the coat of arms of the O’Neills; although there are many theories about its ownership through the centuries, none can be substantiated, the harp’s original owner remains unknown.



### Brian Boru March

Tullinahaw

Part A

Part B

Part C

Brian Boru's March can be slow and funereal or strong and powerful, depending on the tempo it is played. A recording of this tune can be found [here](#). Also, revisit last month's TOTM for "Return From Fingal," another tune associated with the Battle of Clontarf.

\* Chief O'Neill never heard harpist Patrick Byrne play, but an account of a Byrne house concert which appeared in *The Emerald of New York* in 1870 (and repeated presently in *The Fiddler's Companion*) caught his eye. Byrne played for an assemblage in the household of a Dublin gentleman in 1860, and O'Neill quotes from the article:

*"Byrne's command of the harp was complete, the writer tells us. His touch was singularly delicate yet equally firm. He could make the strings whisper like the sigh of the rising wind on a summer eve, or clang with a martial fierceness that made your pulses beat quicker. After quaffing a generous tumbler of punch, he would say, 'Now, ladies and gentlemen, I am going to play you the celebrated march of the great King Brian to the field of Clontarf, when he gave the Danes such a drubbing. The Irish army is far off, but if you listen attentively you will hear the faint sound of their music.' Then his fingers would wander over the upper range of strings with so delicate a touch that you might fancy it was fairy music heard from a distance. Anything more fine, more soft and delicate than this performance, it is impossible to conceive. 'They are coming nearer!' And the sound increased in volume. 'Now here they are!' And the music rolled loud and full. Thus the march went on; the fingers of the minstrel's right hand wandering farther down the bass range. You find it hard to keep your feet quiet, and feel inclined to take part in the march music assumes a merry, lightsome character, as if it were played for dancers. 'Rejoicing for the victory!' But this abruptly ceases; there is another shriek and dischord, jangling and confusion in the upper bass stings. The harper explains as usual, 'They have found the old King murdered in his tent.' Then the air becomes much slower and singularly plaintive. 'Mourning for Brian's death.' There is a firmer and louder touch now, with occasional plaintive effects with the left hand. 'They are marching now with the brave old King's body to Drogheda.' The music now assumes a slow and steady tone, the tone is lowered, and grows momentarily louder and louder, till finally it dies away..."*

## From the Irish Kitchen (recipes suitable for clipping)

**This month's recipe...**"Apple Barley Pudding" Some of the best Irish dishes are the simplest ones, based on solid, good quality ingredients, not treated in any fancy way but simply with a respect for their basic flavors and the way the ingredients interact with other foods. This recipe is one of those.



### Ingredients:

- 4 tablespoons of Pearl barley
- 1.5 pounds of apples, peeled, cored and sliced
- 3 tablespoons of Sugar
- Good cup of heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon of lemon juice

### Method:

Boil the Barley in water and add the apples. Cook until both begin to soften. Drain and blend the mixture in a blender or sieve. Cook the mixture after adding the sugar and lemon and boil again. Allow to cool and then chill, adding the cream on top. Makes 4 servings. Try yogurt in place of the cream, making it a great low fat dessert.



## RANDOM RAMBLINGS

- ✚ **Friends of St. Mary's Raffle** The Friends' Dorothy Fey writes: "Hopefully spring weather is just around the corner and the Friends of St. Mary's has the perfect thing for that first nice day. Thanks to the talent and generosity of Mr. Richard Resig, we have two beautiful handcrafted Adirondack Chairs to raffle to benefit St Mary's. If you live in the Camden area, the chairs are currently on display in a store window at 67 Main Street in Camden. The tickets are \$5.00 each or 3 for \$10.00. If you are interested in showing your support and taking a chance on our raffle, please mail your check to: Dorothy Fey, 9180 Bones Road, Taberg NY, 13471. The drawing will be on May 22, 2011 in Florence.
- ✚ **"Nuacht as Craobh Dugan"---news from the Dugan Branch** Chris Hoke of Craobh Dugan sent in the following report on the long-awaited "Echoes of Erin" Comhaltas North American's Concert Tour. "Echoes of Erin is coming to the Mohawk Valley!! Friday October 14 is the date, and Rome's Capitol Theater is the place. The tour group is a collection of All-Ireland musicians and world-champion dancers who will perform 10-12 concerts in 2 weeks between New York City and St. Louis, including one right here in the Mohawk Valley!! We will pass on more information as it becomes available, but as has been emphasized over the last few months: we will need everyone's help to make this venue a success. Mike Hoke is the venue chairman and is still looking for two people or couples to chair two committees.
- ✚ **Rose of Tralee Contest** Do you know a wonderful young lady 18 to 27yrs old? The New York Rose of Tralee Committee will select a representative on Sunday May 1, at the Polish Center in Yonkers, NY. The Rose of Tralee is all about personality and Irish "Craic;" it is not a beauty contest, the bathing suits can stay in the drawer until summer. The New York Committee welcomes nominations of great young ladies who are fun, articulate, Irish by birth or by ancestry, and embrace their Irish heritage. To nominate a great girl, email Jim Houlihan at [JLOHOULS@gmail.com](mailto:JLOHOULS@gmail.com), or call 845-445-9036.
- ✚ **Utica St. Patrick's Day Raffle** The winners of the raffle to benefit the 2011 St. Patrick's Parade were: 1st - Private Party for 25 at the 1888 Tavern FX Matt Brewery - Shawn Fallon; 2nd - Weekend gate passes and 1 day hospitality at the 2011 GAIF - Mike and Chris Hoke; 3rd - Two Stanley Theater show tickets, limo service and dinner at Celtic Harp - Kathy Hill and Tom Gregory. Congratulations to you all!
- ✚ **Albany AOH Hosts Black 47** On Saturday, April 9, Black 47 will be in concert at the Irish American Cultural Center, 375 Ontario Street in Albany. The 8 PM concert is a benefit for the NYS Ancient Order of Hibernians Convention Fund. You can make reservations by clicking [here](#). The cost is only \$20 per person. Black 47 marked its 20th year on the road in 2010 with the release of their latest album, Bankers and Gangsters.
- ✚ **Harp Master Patrick Ball Visits Old Songs Concert Series** On Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, famed harpist and storyteller Patrick Ball will bring his captivating show to the Old Songs Concert Series in Voorseesville. Patrick Ball is one of the premier Celtic harp players in the world and a captivating spoken word artist. He has recorded nine instrumental and three spoken word albums which have sold well over one-half million copies internationally and won national awards in both the music and spoken word categories. Tickets for the 8 PM show are \$20, with children 12 and under getting in for \$5. Old Songs is located at 37 South Main St in Voorheesville. For more information, call (518) 765-2815.
- ✚ **The McKrells Reunion Concert** One of the Capital District's favorite bands, The McKrells, will be performing at a very special reunion concert at the Egg in Albany, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, at 7:30 PM. In their prime, the McKrells -- Kevin McKrell on guitar and vocals, Chris Leske on banjo, Craig Vance on guitar and Doug Moody on fiddle -- were revered by fans and musicians alike; melding Bluegrass with Celtic roots, tossing in the heartfelt fervor of folk and putting it all out there with the energy of rock. Tickets for the show are \$20, and can be purchased on line or by calling the box office, at (518) 473-1845.

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

Apr 1	Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Apr 1	"Mostly Irish" Monthly Jam	Irish American Club	Amsterdam NY	7:30 PM	Free
Apr 2	Pat Kane	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Apr 2	Hair of the Dog	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	8 PM	\$13
Apr 3	Donal O'Shaughnessey	<a href="#">Coleman's Irish Pub</a>	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 4	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 5	"Nail Creek Sessions"	<a href="#">Nail Creek Pub</a>	Utica	7:30-10 PM	Free
Apr 7	Traditional Irish Session	<a href="#">Marcellus Legion Hall</a>	Marcellus, NY	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 8	McKrells Reunion	<a href="#">The Egg</a>	Albany	7:30 PM	\$20
Apr 8-9	Neil Emberg	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Apr 9	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free
Apr 9	Black 47	<a href="#">Hibernian Hall</a>	Albany	8 PM	\$20
Apr 9	Matt and Shannon Heaton	<a href="#">Caffè Lena</a>	Saratoga Springs	8 PM	\$15 adv/\$17 door
Apr 11	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 14	Traditional Irish Session	<a href="#">Marcellus Legion Hall</a>	Marcellus, NY	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 15	Donal O'Shaughnessey	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Apr 15	Rakish Paddy	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	9 PM	\$5
Apr 16	<a href="#">Ceilidh</a> w/Oran Mor Pipe Band	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	6:30PM	\$5
Apr 17	<a href="#">Syracuse Irish Session</a>	Johnston's Bally Bay Pub	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 18	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 20	Traditional Irish Session	<a href="#">The Mill</a>	Rome, NY	7:30 PM	Free
Apr 20	Traditional Irish Session	<a href="#">Marcellus Legion Hall</a>	Marcellus, NY	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 22	Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Apr 23	Orla Fallon (from Celtic Woman)	<a href="#">The Egg</a>	Albany	7:30 PM	\$28
Apr 23	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free
Apr 25	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Apr 28	Traditional Irish Session	<a href="#">Marcellus Legion Hall</a>	Marcellus, NY	4-7 PM	Free
Apr 29	Causeway Giants	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Apr 29	Patrick Ball	<a href="#">Old Songs</a>	Voorheesville	8 PM	\$20; 12 under \$5
Apr 29	Triskele	<a href="#">Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	8 PM	\$5

If you have anything you want to share with us, feel free to send it to us ([sistia@roadrunner.com](mailto:sistia@roadrunner.com), [bloftis@gmail.com](mailto:bloftis@gmail.com) or [marksisti@roadrunner.com](mailto:marksisti@roadrunner.com)), and we'll be happy to include it. As always, while we try to get things – prices, places, genders, etc. -- as accurate as we can, sometimes (but not often) we admit to making mistakes. It always makes sense to call ahead to confirm some of these further-out trips.