

May at the Museum!



Bealtaine is a festival which occurs on May 1st and also refers to the month of May. It typifies our recent Irish ancestors' dual spiritual tradition: predominantly Christian but with Pagan aspects remaining. The Roman Catholic church tried and failed many times to get the Irish people to fully renounce their old Pagan rituals and superstitions. In many instances, the church simply combined Christian with Pagan festivals. A major Celtic / Pagan festival, Bealtaine marks the start of the Celtic summer and it is also seen in Ireland as the month of Our Lady the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Our ancient and recent farming ancestors relied on significant calendar events to give them reassurance and to remind them when to sow and when to reap. Bealtaine is one of the four

major Irish Celtic annual festivals along with Samhain, Imbolc and Lughnasa. It signifies the return of the light and widely observed throughout Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man, while May Day celebrations occur throughout Europe.

Bealtaine (or Beltaine) appears in a 9/10th century Irish glossary apparently written by the King of Munster/Bishop of Cashel, Cormac úa Cuileinnáin.

First written in Irish:

Belltaine .i. bil tene .i. tene shoinmech .i. dáthene dognítis
druidhe triathaircedlu (no cotinchetlaib) móraib combertis
nacethrai arthedmannaib cachá bliadna cusnaténdtíbsin
[!]eictis nacethra etarru.

Cormac's glossary was translated in the 19th century by John O'Donovan who wrote:

BELLTAINNE 'May-day' i.e. bil-tene i.e. lucky fire, i.e. two fires which Druids used to make with great incantations, and they used to bring the cattle [as a safeguard] against the diseases of each year to those fires [in marg.] they used to drive the cattle between them.

Comparing the two we can see the originally text never contained 'May-Day' and it was added by O'Donovan as part of the translation.

Fire played a special part in these rituals. It has been speculated that the fire in Bealtaine celebrations symbolizes the return of the sun after winter. Other theories suggest that fire rituals are based on a type of imitative or sympathetic magic. Certain practices were to ensure a plentiful supply of sun for the growing season. Bonfires were lit and their flames, smoke and ashes were believed to have protective powers.

It marked the time on the farming calendar for cattle to be driven out to the summer pastures and rituals were performed to protect the cattle, crops and people, and to encourage growth. The people and their cattle would walk around the bonfire and in some cases leap over the flames or embers. These rituals involving fire were to symbolically burn and cleanse potentially destructive influences, marking a new beginning in the farming year.

By the 19th century, our farming ancestors dwelled in thatched cottages (the dominant building type in the Irish countryside). Although the majority worshipped under the Catholic religion, many elements of Bealtaine persisted, and some listed here continue to this day.

The fire in the hearth was the central focal point for all activities in the cottage. The fire at all other times of the year was never allowed to go out, but all household fires were ceremonially quenched on May Day and then re-lit with fire from the Bealtaine bonfire outside. At this time of year, fire was not permitted to leave the house - even its smoke - as it was considered likely that all luck of the house would also leave with it.

Such beliefs dominated other important goods leaving the house, such as dairy products and tools. Anything that was related to the profit of the house was not given away at this time, as it was believed to do so was to give away the profit of the year. Out of respect for these beliefs, and to retain the luck of houses, water or fire was never asked for or taken from the home on May Eve or May Day. Not even to light a pipe! It was considered offensive to even ask to borrow something from the house at this time, and people who did so were viewed suspiciously.

Water drawn from local holy wells at this time was considered especially potent and flowers left at holy wells on May Day were also believed to be restorative. The dew that occurred on the morning of May Day was thought to offer a cure for the rest of the year and washing the face with or walking in the first dew of May day was believed to have curative properties, and to prevent aging!

Many Pagan Celtic traditions from medieval times were incorporated into Marian veneration, the most notable of which was the collection of flowers. Flowers were used to decorate grottoes, altars and Marian shrines, as well as crowning statues of Our Lady in processions.

May altars in the home were also decorated with flowers. These holy spaces in the home, flanked by pictures of saints, Our Lady and the Sacred Heart, replaced the tradition of Pagan offerings to the gods likely to have been in Irish homes since pre-history. Seasonal bluebells, mimicking the blue associated with Our Lady, were popular. Above all, yellow flowers, such as primroses and gorse were seen as particularly potent against evil spirits (faeries) who were renowned for their dislike of that color. Flower offerings were believed also to appease nature spirits and Pagan gods throughout Europe.

Although May was heralded with joy, an element of the magical lay behind the merriments, with protection against unseen forces given an urgency at this time. This was especially believed to be the case between sunrise on May Eve and sunrise on May Day, when evil spirits were seen to be at their most potent. Wells were guarded at that time in case the water within was taken to be used by those who might work magical spells against you. May flowers were spread on doorsteps (a common tradition in Ulster) and hung above doors (considered liminal areas) to discourage bad luck from entering the home.

There were curious beliefs around housework in May. It was considered unlucky to dust the house and believed unlucky to get married in May. It was considered unlucky to dig, bathe, whitewash or sail on May Day. Not hearing the cuckoo in the month of May meant certain death for the non-hearer! An egg hidden in the house or stable would bring bad luck to the household for the year. My neighbor, Mary (John B.) Keane was a big believer in these piseogs (folk superstitions), and I'll admit to getting up in the dawn a couple of times in my teen years to bathe my face in the dew!

Decorating a May Bush or May Tree was traditional in many parts of Europe. In Ireland, a tree or bush was decorated with ribbons or shells near an individual house. It was usually white thorn, the most potent of faery trees which flowers in May, which paradoxically is considered very unlucky if brought indoors. A green bough hung over the door, woven from sycamore, was also believed to bring good luck. Some believe that customs like these are a remnant of a very ancient Pagan tree worship.

Extracts taken from an article by Dr Marion McGarry, art historian, author, independent researcher and lecturer at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology.

Traditional Music in the Rambling House at the Museum with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann Thursday May 2nd 7pm. Donations Appreciated.

Join us at the museum for our own rambling house and an informal music and song session by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (the Irish Musicians' Association). This is a monthly event at the museum and very popular. Bring your party piece or instrument! Audience participation welcome and encouraged by our friendly group. Hear traditional Irish music, and old songs, stories and poems in a traditional format that still happens in many Irish homes (and bars) today.

The motto of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is "ceol agus gaol" (music and kinship). Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, headquartered in Ireland, is the primary Irish organization dedicated to the promotion of the music, song, dance and the language of Ireland. There are branches of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann all over the world.

Light refreshments will be provided.



Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, former Lord Mayor of Belfast Monday May 6th 5pm. Donations Appreciated.

From 1987-1997, Máirtín was among a new generation of Sinn Féin councillors (led by former Mayor Alex Maskey) who transformed Belfast City Council through a series of landmark legal challenges which guaranteed equal rights for all representatives. He left politics in 1997 to take over the Andersonstown News, growing it into the Belfast Media Group with colleagues and launching the republican-leaning daily newspaper Daily Ireland in 2005. He returned to City Hall in 2011 and was elected Lord Mayor/ArdMhéara in 2013. He was returned for Sinn Féin in the Stormont Assembly election of May 2016 and again in March 2017 (securing the highest-ever Sinn Féin vote in the constituency) as a representative for South Belfast. Following the 2016 poll, he was appointed to the post of Finance Minister in the North of Ireland Executive and remained in post until the Executive collapsed in January 2017.

Máirtín is a tireless advocate for the new and resurgent Belfast, he founded a series of initiatives designed to showcase the very best of the city including the Aisling Awards and the Belfast International Homecoming which encourages the global Irish diaspora to invest Belfast's renaissance. Among his awards flowing from his year as Lord Mayor were the Community Relations Council Award for Civic Leadership, the PRIDE Festival Award for Best Political Contribution to the LGBT Community, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians of America JFK Medal, their highest honour.

Máirtín will discuss a changing Belfast and Ireland at this pivotal moment in history, twenty-one years after the Good Friday Agreement and with Brexit looming.



Film Club: *66 Days*
Tuesday May 7th, 7pm. \$5

On the 5th of May, 1981 Irish Republican Bobby Sands' 66-day hunger strike brought the attention of the world to his cause. Drawing on an Irish Republican tradition of martyrdom, Sands' emotive, non-violent protest to be classified as a political prisoner became a defining moment in 20th century Irish history. Sands' death after 66 days marked a key turning point in the relationship between Britain and Ireland, and brought a global spotlight to the Northern Irish

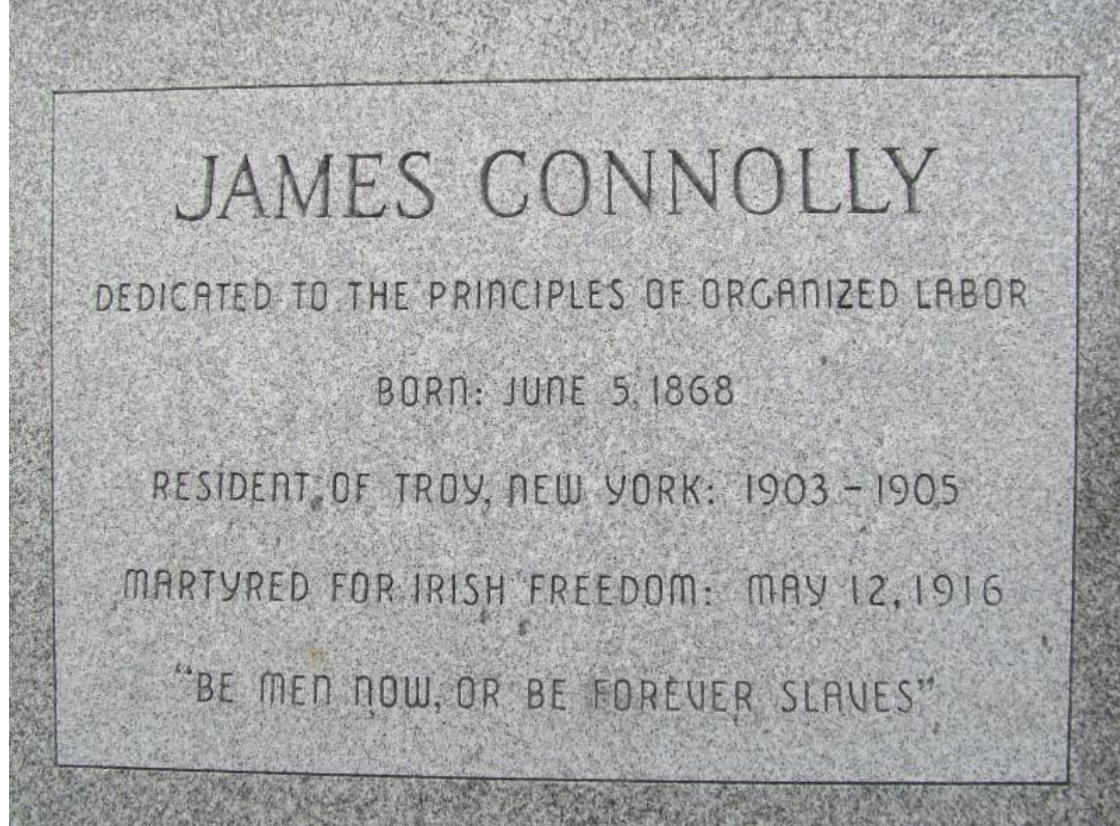
conflict which eventually triggered international efforts to resolve it. 66 DAYS is a major feature length documentary exploring Sands' remarkable life and death, 38 years on from his ultimate sacrifice. The spine of the film is comprised of Sands' own words, drawn from his hunger strike diary, a unique insight into the man and his beliefs as he embarked on his final journey. Directed by award winning filmmaker Brendan J Byrne and produced by Trevor Birney of Fine Point Films, this landmark non-fiction feature film had its world premiere at Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto on 3 May 2016.



Remembering James Connolly in the Capital Region Thursday May 9th, 7pm. Donations Appreciated.

The Museum will mark Labor History Month with this panel on a trans-Atlantic hero. James Connolly lived from 1903 to 1905 in the then thriving manufacturing city of Troy, New York, and he later organized in New Jersey before his return to Ireland. Connolly is remembered for his special ability to weave the threads of revolutionary socialism, trades unionism and Irish national liberation. Connolly's years in the U.S. were spent as a leader of both the Industrial Workers of the World union and the Socialist Labor Party, then the dominant socialist organization in the United States.

Connolly scholars, Anne Neville, Michael Barrett and Denis Foley will discuss the varied contributions and influences of and on James Connolly while he lived and worked in Troy, before returning to Ireland, where he was executed for his participation in the 1916 Rising. Using primary sources, including some of his own letters, and with an accompanying exhibit, the panel will shed light on his inspiring work.



**Christopher Klein, *When the Irish Invaded Canada*
Monday May 13th, 7pm. \$3 admission.**

The self-proclaimed Irish Republican Army invaded Canada not just once, but five times between 1866 and 1871 in what are known collectively as the Fenian Raids. Several of those attacks were launched from upstate New York and included many men from the local area. The book tells the incredible true story of the Irish-American Civil War veterans who undertook one of the most fantastical missions in military history, and it's the first popular history of the Fenian Raids told from the point of view of the Fenians themselves. The Irish rebels achieved the first Irish military victory over the British since 1745, made the United States a key player in Anglo-Irish affairs, and forged a transatlantic framework that proved pivotal in providing the financial and military support that decades later led to Ireland's eventual liberation from British rule.

Christopher Klein is the author of three books, including *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*. A frequent contributor to *History.com*, Christopher has also written for *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Harvard Magazine*, *Smithsonian.com*, and *AmericanHeritage.com*. He lives in Andover, Massachusetts.

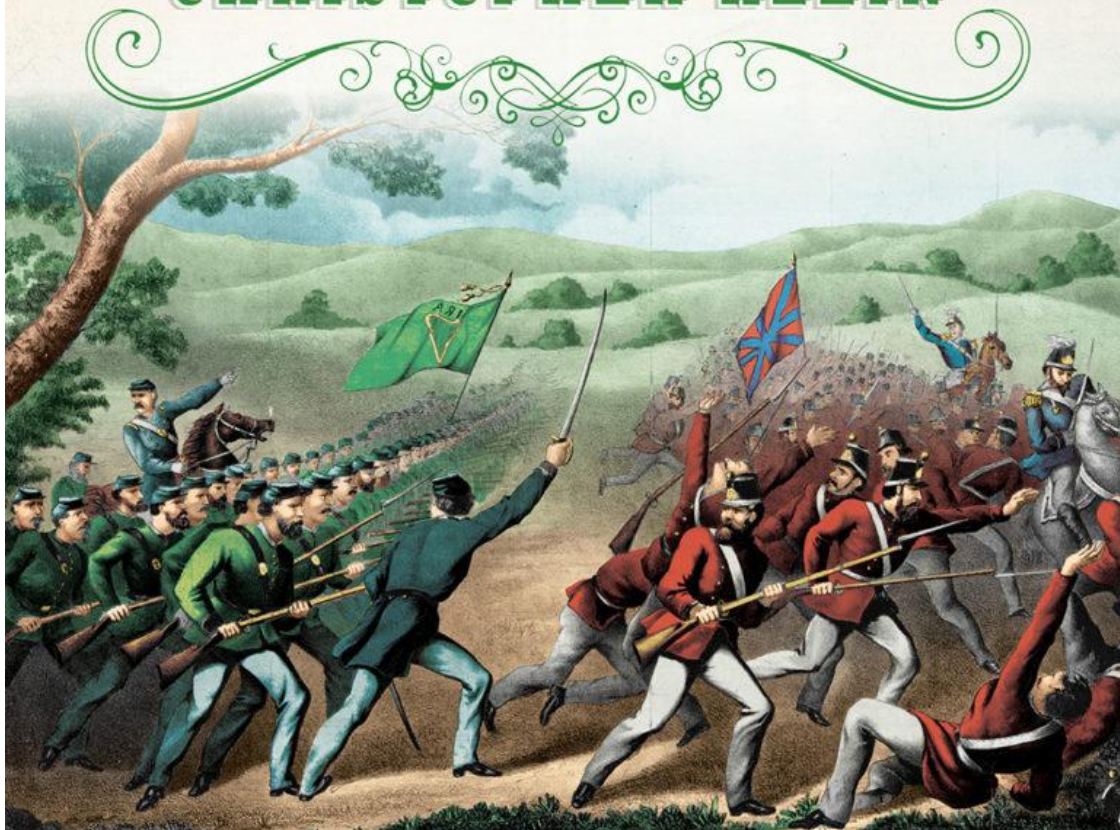
"Christopher Klein's new book is a must-read for all with even a passing interest in Irish America, Ireland, and the Civil War. His fast-flowing, often lyrical, often gritty narrative commands the reader's attention from the opening paragraphs. His portrait of this turbulent and crucial era in America's and Ireland's annals is captivating." **Boston Irish Reporter**

"From today's perspective the invasions of Canada by Irish-Americans in 1866 and 1870 to strike a blow for Irish independence by attacking an outpost of the British Empire seems to have the qualities of a comic opera. But these 'Fenians' were deadly serious, and though they failed to achieve their goal in 1870 their example helped inspire the movement that led to eventual success a half century later. Christopher Klein's fresh telling of this story is an important landmark in both Irish and American history." **James M. McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* and *The War That Forged a Nation***

WHEN THE
IRISH
— INVADED —
CANADA

THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY OF THE CIVIL WAR
VETERANS WHO FOUGHT FOR IRELAND'S FREEDOM

CHRISTOPHER KLEIN



**Place Names in Ireland, Two Rivers Gaelic League
Tuesday, May 28th, 7pm. Donations Appreciated.**

If you spend time studying a fairly detailed map of Ireland, it becomes clear that there are sounds and parts of words that appear over and over again in many place names. This is true of any culture (e.g. English -borough, -pool, -ham, -cester, -town; French -ville, German -burg).

Ireland is no exception, except that its place names can trace their ancestry to three language families: Gaelic, English and Viking.

If you have the name of an Irish place name, it is often possible to work out its origins. Many of them are made up of descriptions of the neighborhood. For example, if there are two features, say lakes, close together, the larger one will often have -more in its name, and the smaller one -beg. Human structures also find their way into names: droichead is a bridge, and dun is a fortress. Many others are named after people, usually the lords who owned the lands on which they were built. Castledawson and Manorhamilton are examples.

A word of caution, however. A large number of Gaelic words sound similar, and in many cases the Anglicization of Gaelic place names has confused the spelling, making it look as if a place name means one thing when it actually means something completely different. Too many people fall into the trap of taking the English spelling, looking it up in an Irish dictionary and assuming they have the right meaning. Two Rivers Gaelic League will discuss the complexity of place names in Ireland. With many names being "lost in translation," this will be a fascinating look at meaning and the importance of names in historical geography.

