

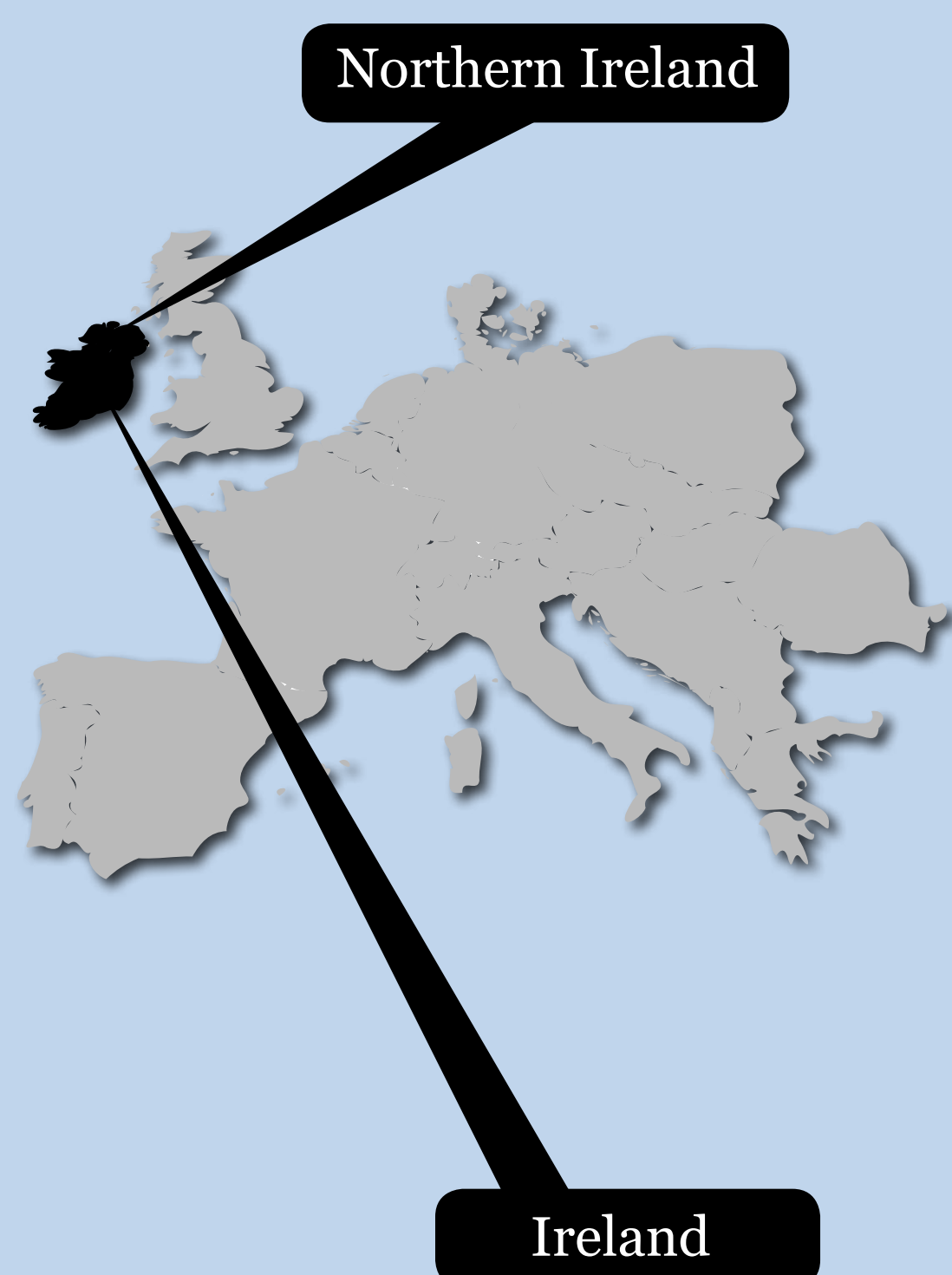


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Ryan Dowdy

I began my training as a balladeer in Glencolumbkille, County Donegal. In Irish the name means the Glen of St. Colum Cille, saint who drove all the demons out of the Glen by shooting his magic bell at them. After the cross-eyed bus driver told me this, I hopped out, grabbed my backpack and guitar, and realized I had stumbled upon the end of the world. The mountains swooped to the sky and hedged in the valley, so that the land had nowhere to go except to roll down into the vast, crashing ocean.

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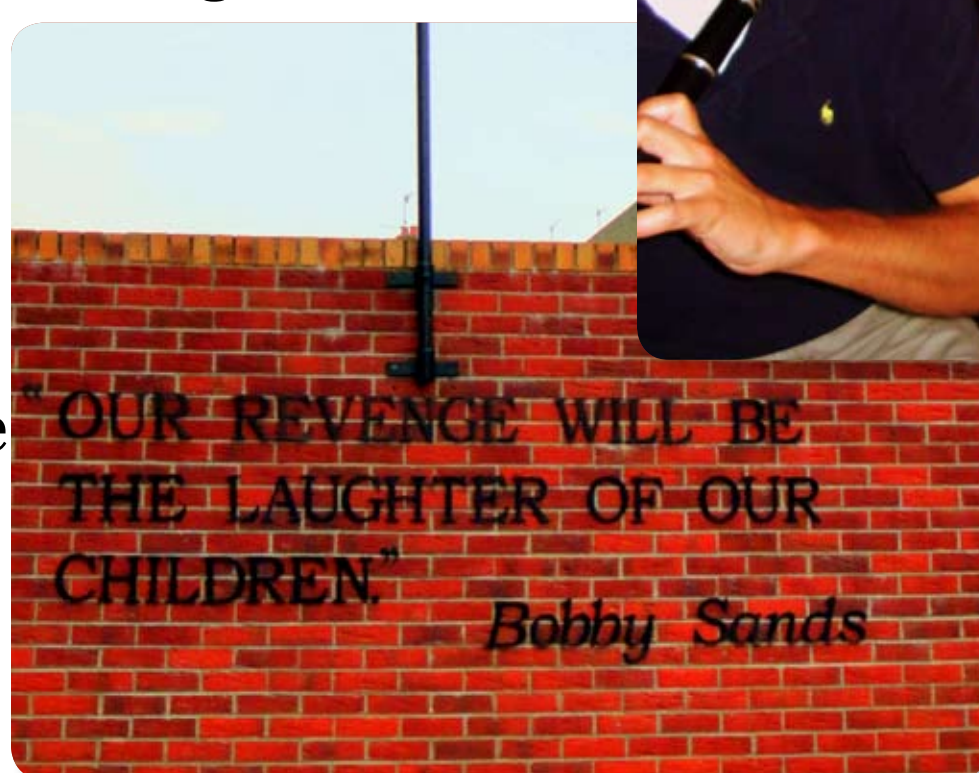
# CÉN SCÉAL, EIREANN? WHAT'S THE STORY, IRELAND? STUDYING IRISH REBEL BALLADRY

I spent one month in Glencolumbkille learning the Irish language during the day and traditional music at night in Teach Bidy's, a pub where Donegal's best fiddlers came to show their chops and test their speed. Teach Bidy's not only mixed drinks, but mixed people from all over the world: Irish language students from Japan, Finland, Denmark, Germany, New York, California, together with Irish locals, turf cutters, sheep farmers, and Donegal musicians. We all communicated in Gaeilge, the Irish language, and also in traditional Irish music, knitting music together into sets of three or four to keep feet tapping and people dancing: The Maid behind the Bar, Pipe on the Hob, Pigeon on a Gate. After the tunes, the ballads began: The Minstrel Boy, Raglan Road, The Hills of Donegal, God Save Ireland. I drank in all the rebel ballads and language I could in Glencolumbkille, and gained a deep respect for the Irish language, so full of poetry and a brooding vitality.



With the Irish language now in my pocket, I could pull it out and show it to Irish speakers. It was a way in to get people to open up about the history of English oppression and even the current state of Northern Ireland. After I moved to Belfast, I walked along the Falls Road with a limping IRA member nicknamed Rocky, protestant bullet still in his knee, who spent the seventies and eighties in Long Kesh Prison

with his friend Bobby Sands, an iconic figure of the Troubles whose face is painted all over the brick walls of Belfast. Rocky told me about growing up in fear of the Protestant police force, about constructing bombs, about boxing with his prisonmate Joe McDonnell, about digging a tunnel



and escaping from Long Kesh. That night he invited me to the bar he now owned – around midnight the doors were locked and the rebel ballads started, including the Ballad of Joe McDonnell:

*You dare to call me a terrorist  
While you look down your gun  
When I think of all the deeds  
that you have done -  
You have plundered many  
nations  
Divided many lands  
You have terrorized their  
people  
You ruled with an iron hand  
And you brought this reign of  
terror to my land.*

After singing this song about his friend who died in the Hunger Strikes of 1981, Rocky turned to me. "Ireland was once known for its innocence. That's gone now, never to return. Those people didn't have to die."

I went on to Galway for the Arts Festival, a sharp change from divided Belfast where I felt the tension like an electric hum in the air. During the Festival I sang ballads as part of the milieu of street performers, earning a few euros on the side. One night after performing, I headed up to Eyre Square, downtown Galway,

to meet up with other musicians. We sat and talked about music, Galway, and the best place to get doner kebabs. Two men walked up, and I greeted them with the standard Cén scéal, or what's the story? Níl aon scéal agam, one of them returned, no story with me. Is as Connemara tú? Are you from Connemara? Is as Alabama me. I am from Alabama. He didn't believe me – he thought I had a thick Connemara accent. We began talking about the North and the Troubles, and they were impressed by my interest and knowledge, especially from an outsider. They were members of the new IRB – the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the group that staged the Easter Rising in 1916. They each clasped my hand and elbow, repeating mo mhac, my son. I was officially, but clandestinely, a member of the Brotherhood. Ireland was an odd place indeed. Beneath it all, however, was the pulsing heart of the land, beating an even rhythm to the accompanying sorrows.

After I returned from Ireland and continued my pursuits of music and poetry, I realized how much the experience had shaped my view of an artist's purpose. Instead of channeling their own egos or creating a disinterested ars gratia artis, the musicians I met in Ireland were devoted to telling the stories of their own country and its savage yet beautiful past. In the same way, I recognized how my endeavors as an individual musician and poet are able to give voice to stories in my community that would otherwise remain untold. By commemorating their history through rebel song, the Irish balladeers taught me to respond to What's the story? with my own music, singing of the people and places I love.

