OVER A YEAR AGO, Eddie Lenihan was telling me about collecting stories on the fairy faith. He said, “Of all that time, I met maybe ten or a dozen people that I could, you know, look back and say—‘There’s a person with religion.’ Not religion in the sense of Catholic or Protestant…not that. But they believed in the fairies, or they believed in the other world. And you would not dare criticize them…or you wouldn’t dare laugh at them…I can take you to another man [whose] stories are so, so unusual. This is a man who plays [music] for the fairies. Every night when he says his prayers, he prays for the fairies, that they’ll be saved on the last day. Now, you’d say to yourself—‘Is this man off his mind?’ Not at all. This man drinks his pint. He plays the flute. He drives his car. He’s 89 [and] he has his senses as you have yours. But, he’ll tell you some stories about [the fairies] and, by God, you won’t laugh. He’s as logical as a ruler. He’ll frighten you…[And] to think that a man like that could be alive in the year 2002. You know, he’s something out of the 1802 kind of thing. He’s as modern-minded as—and yet, he’s not. Thanks be to God that he’s alive [and] that I was alive to sit down in his kitchen and listen to him.”

Eddie Lenihan is a collector, writer, and presenter of Irish stories, folklore, and folklife in the 21st century. Lenihan’s experience demonstrates some of the ways the storytelling process has changed, along with other changes in Ireland over the last twenty years. Through his collaboration with his informants, his creative writing and performances, Lenihan helps people in Ireland rediscover and reconnect with their significant heritage of storytelling. He uses “a good story” not just to entertain (although he does) but to expand what we learn from plain historic facts and gain insight on the meaning behind earlier behavior and belief.

For me, listening to and learning from Eddie Lenihan all started a few years ago when I was researching storytelling in Ireland. I was surprised that none of the academic sources I was reading at that time mentioned the well-known work of Lenihan, although I have found a few references to his contributions since then. Because this seemed like a significant omission, I decided to present a study of Lenihan’s work that would add to the current discussion on storytelling in contemporary Ireland. My primary source for this project was Eddie Lenihan and his work, and includes his books of folktales and folklore, his recorded stories, and my interviews with him.

Eddie Lenihan lives in Crusheen, a village in County Clare in the west of Ireland. In August of 2002, I traveled to
Ireland where I sat down with him for several interviews. I also accompanied him to visit some of the storytellers who have been his informant-collaborators, attended some of his storytelling performances, and rode around County Clare with Lenihan as he pointed out key places that he names in these stories.

In person, Lenihan is an animated and engaging storyteller. He moves around as he tells a story, his body alternately tensing or springing up at dramatic points, his voice ranging from just above a whisper to a bold shout. A large portion of his storytelling is for American or other tour groups visiting Ireland, but he also tells stories at festivals, libraries, pubs, and prisons.

Storytelling began centuries ago in Ireland—a dynamic, oral art form that preserves and passes on heroic myths and legends of Ireland’s Celtic past. In many ways, the stories complement the historic record visible in the landscape. Even now, remnants of an Iron Age ring fort can lay untouched in the middle of a farmer’s field, and carved stone slabs mark 7th-century pilgrimage stations right along a village street, all regular reminders of Ireland’s past. Back in the early 1900s, storytelling was still one of the main forms of community entertainment for the rural peasantry in Ireland. During long winter nights, it was customary for people to gather and visit in one another’s homes where their activities could include singing, dancing, and making music, in addition to telling stories.

Now prospective visitors to Ireland can search the Internet for information on “Heritage Tours” for itineraries that include storytelling in their offerings. Storytellers like Eddie Lenihan are learning to make good use of the new settings and available technology. On Lenihan’s own website (http://eddielenihan.ennis.ie) you can check on his latest publications, get information for books that are out of print, and even listen to a short story presentation.

Eddie Lenihan initially discovered storytelling in the 1970s when he was working on his graduate degree in phonetics at University College Galway. He had an assignment to record older people talking, in order to compare their speech patterns to that of younger residents of the same community. He told me that once he started talking to these older people, he “found out that what they were saying to me was a lot more interesting than how they said it.” The stories people told Lenihan made such an impact on him that they have been central to his work ever since.

For Lenihan, the stories represent something “truly Irish” because they come out of a traditional storytelling process and because of what they add to our understanding of the past. The stories are important whether they relate personal memories, clarify an historical event, or delve into aspects of the supernatural. The search for new stories attracts him as a collector—and the stories he collects provide the material and inspiration for Lenihan as a writer and storyteller.

Lenihan says that he can’t remember how many people he has recorded on tape, but he estimates that he has worked with several hundred informants over his 29 years of collecting stories. In many cases, he develops lasting friendships with the people he interviews and he has recorded dozens of hours of many of these interviews. I was fortunate to meet two of Lenihan’s informant-collaborators, Francie Kennelly and Mick O’Dwyer. Through their stories, they have each contributed to Lenihan’s knowledge of fairylore and local history. In fact, it was O’Dwyer who told Lenihan his stories about a lone fairy bush at Latoon, near Ennis in County Clare—a site that turned out to be more significant for my project than I ever expected.

Over the weekend before I arrived in August 2002, someone attacked the fairy bush with a chain saw and chopped off all of the branches. Back in 1999 there had been a lot of publicity when Eddie Lenihan warned about the danger of harming this lone whitethorn tree, or fairy bush, because it was in the path of a proposed highway bypass. Lenihan told them that damaging the fairy bush would anger the fairies and people might be injured or even die as a result.

Public support was mixed at the time. For many people, the idea of changing the design of an access ramp due to the presence of fairies was laughable and embarrassing as they wanted Ireland to be regarded as a modern, high-tech, country. There is this push-pull effect in Ireland, as people struggle with issues of old beliefs versus modernity. As things turned out, in 1999 the highway design was changed during the planning
stage and the fairy bush was incorporated as a landscape element. But some people continued to be unhappy about it, even four years later.

In early August 2002, the Clare County Council Engineer called Lenihan on a Monday morning to alert him about vandalism of the bush. By Tuesday, when I arrived at Lenihan’s, the media was in full swing, calling him for interviews and statements. To the community at large, he has become an interpreter and spokesman for older, traditional behavior and beliefs.

On that August day, once Lenihan had finished fielding several phone calls, we were off to visit the site for a photo op with the press. Afterwards, we visited Mick O'Dwyer, who lives in the area. The first thing that O'Dwyer said when Lenihan told him about the attack on the fairy bush was, “Is he still alive?” meaning the person who damaged the bush. During our conversation about the bush, O'Dwyer led into another story about his experience with a different fairy bush, this one on the grounds of a factory in Limerick.

It was obvious that Mick O'Dwyer and Eddie Lenihan were used to this form of give-and-take conversation, leading from one story to another. Following each of O'Dwyer’s stories, Lenihan always had another related question that confirmed or added an additional detail to what O'Dwyer had said. In the case of the bush at the factory, Lenihan asked, “And, ’twas a lone bush?” To which O'Dwyer replied, “Oh, a lone bush—the same as the bush at Latoon” (the bush along the highway).

When telling stories, Lenihan’s favorites are “the vicious and the violent.” He always asks the audience what they would like to hear, but is ready to tell what he calls “the horrible—I like to shock the parents. You see, we’re too used to getting the Walt Disney format—you know, the sugary, the sweet, nice ending.” He finds that children can handle, and even enjoy, stronger stories in his books as well as in his live performances.

And children are not his only audience, either. Lenihan says, “Adults enjoy [the stories] every single bit as much as children…and for a person who wants to read them carefully, they’ll see the political commentary in there, as well.” He criticizes current political leaders through his Fionn Mac Cumhail stories—a series about characters in pre-Christian Ireland. He says, “I like particularly, to have a go at the government, in the shape of King Cormac, who’s an idiot…even the most thick of the fighting men of the Fianna are smarter than the king.”

When there are children in the audience, Lenihan definitely plays to them, but he is as likely to interact with adults. He is also aware of subtle responses in the audience. Once,
when we were talking about his storytelling session the night before, he mentioned noticing a woman’s reaction in the audience. He said she was “a white-haired lady, and I could see that she was enjoying the story, particularly the one about the leprechaun. I’d say she must have heard the story somewhere before. I could just see by her face, it gave me the sort of impression that she was an old lady listening to the story as a young lady herself… or maybe lookin’ at the children listening to the story gave her the impression of listenin’ to the story herself, years and years before.”

The places where Eddie Lenihan tells stories are quite different from the regular storytelling settings of a few decades ago, but there is a lively interest in them all the same. As he points out, cultural traditions in Ireland are being threatened by overwhelming influences from other countries, notably the United States and Great Britain. In order to restrain those influences, Lenihan writes and tells engaging stories about mythic Irish heroes and interesting historic areas. Through these stories, people may gain some understanding about the past, have an opportunity to celebrate their heritage, and appreciate the significance of storytelling in Ireland in the 21st century.

As a last note, I want to mention that construction on the highway section near the fairy bush was completed in the fall of 2002. However, Lenihan had difficulty when he tried to check on the bush the following spring, due to all the traffic rushing past it. He knew I was interested in hearing if the bush was recovering, and he was disappointed that he could not get close enough to be certain. Then, he rang me the first week of May 2003 to say, “I was down to see the bush and you’d be delighted to know that it’s out in green leaves right up to the top. It’s very, very much alive.”

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For Further Reading