

How Did The Cape Clear Storytelling Festival Get Started?

The idea to establish Cape Clear Island as a centre for international storytelling through an annual festival began in earnest in 1992 when Nell and I made the rationally absurd, essential decision to move full-time to Oilean Chleire from cosmopolitan Zurich, where we had both been teachers. We wondered how we could put ourselves and the heritage of the island to appropriate use. We fantasised about organising a small animal zoo on our farm, then a craft centre, finally a festival, an international storytelling festival. I decided first to check with the islanders about making Cape a centre for storytelling. Was it appropriate, in keeping with the place? Wizened fishermen and farmers told me stories about the telling of stories: how of an evening a kitchen would fill with neighbours, and more neighbours, until adults and children were sitting on the ship timber settle, the hearth, the flags, up the narrow stairs, and tales were told into the wee hours, even through the night. But no more. The storytellers, they said, are all gone, the very tradition of storytelling gone. The publican of the then southernmost pub in Ireland, Paddy Burke, bless him, told me how he could remember his parents' pub filling with locals, and then the stories being told, one leading to another - until, he added, looking away, "the fella with one eye sat down in the corner." He enigmatically referred to no neighbour, neither living nor dead, but to a certain soulless seanachie still making the rounds. After all these conversations to check that there indeed was a storytelling background to the island, I started corresponding with a number of storytellers around the world to determine their interest in coming to Clear. Then, with much help from Liz Weir (a storyteller from Northern Ireland) and Pat Ryan (an American storyteller from the UK), I visited storytelling festivals about Ireland, began to become familiar with the Irish, UK, and USA scene, and finally, during the summer of 1993, decided to bite the bullet of peace and plan an international festival for the fall of 1994. In September, 1994, the first festival was held, and, lucky us, the event's been an annual - except for the foot and mouth disease year - ever since. The formal mission statement of the committee behind the festival is as follows: "To organise and develop an annual storytelling festival. In so doing to preserve and utilise the resources of the island, including the natural ones. Storytellers and audiences will be invited from around the world. No profits or surpluses shall be distributed to its members but shall be used for the next festival."

Chuck Kruger