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# GOOD TALK SHORTENS THE ROAD



## An Interview With Irish Folklorist Miceal Ross

by Dunc Shields

**Dunc:** There seems to be many references to the theme of hospitality throughout Irish folklore. Does this continue to prevail in contemporary Irish storytelling today?

**Miceal:** Yes, of course. Many of the Irish stories being told today by Irish storytellers will include stories involving some aspect of hospitality. The story might deal with something like the failure to be generous to a neighbour or perhaps the story will be contained within the framework of some sort of feasting or festival. There is the well known story of Bricriu's Feast. Bricriu was a satirist and held a feast to stir up trouble among the warriors of the the Red Branch Knights. This hinged on who should get the cura-mir, the Champion's portion - a part of the meat which was reserved for the greatest champion present. The tale is a long farce as the champions advance their claims and seek arbitrators. At one point Cuchulainn faces

down a rival who retorts, "You wouldn't act this way if my brother was here!" "He is," returns Cuchulainn producing the brother's severed head from under his cloak. At the end of the tale a huge ugly giant offers to allow a hero to behead him on condition that he gets to behead the hero the following night. Only Cuchulainn shows up for the beheading which proves that he is the most courageous of all the Red Branch Knights and thus the feast becomes a celebration honoring Cuchulainn.

**Dunc:** Does the present day Irish storyteller include, in his or her repertoire, international stories such as Anansi or North American First Nation Stories?

**Miceal:** Not very often. Certainly not as often as you would find in North America or for that matter in England or Europe as well. Whenever these international type stories are told by Irish storytellers, they will invariably be

told the Irish way or you might say from an Irish perspective.

**Dunc:** Do Irish storytelling clubs have many personal stories being told on their club nights?

**Miceal:** Yes, of course, but again it will be a personal story true to Irish ways. For example, there is an Irish storyteller by the name of Jack Lynch and he comes from County Cavan, one of the most unjustly neglected Counties in all of Ireland. People there live in small villages and their ways are peculiar to Cavan. Jack Lynch has many stories about a mythical village that some say is, in fact, the ethos of Cavan. All of these stories are humorous accounts of the events from this mythical village and all are told in the way that a person from Cavan would tell them.

**Dunc:** Would you say that the humour in Irish storytelling has any particular style that makes it different than the humour found in storytelling from other coun-

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tries around the world ?

**Miceal:** Irish humour, as it is found in contemporary Irish storytelling, is definitely different than what you will find elsewhere. If you look at North American or British storytelling humour, for example, you will see the punch line type humour and the one-liner type jokes used quite extensively. The Irish storytellers may have a humorous twist to their story, but not a punch line as such. Fairy abduction is a very common theme for Irish storytelling and this always involves humour. Many abduction stories are of great sadness, but this sadness is always tempered with humour. In general, I think it must be said that the humour found in Irish stories is more something that runs throughout the story.

**Dunc:** Would you say that the Finn story where Finn appoints the tramp to race against the warrior King could be thought of as a typical example of humour in Irish storytelling?

**Miceal:** It's interesting that you should mention that particular story because if you look out that window you will see Dublin Bay and that is where this story actually happened. Of course , throughout the story there are these farcical situations starting with the tramp's clod hopper boots through to his running backwards and so on. All this is spread throughout the story making it quite typical of humour in Irish storytelling.

**Dunc:** Would you say that Irish humour has influenced the Irish religious community in any particular way?

**Miceal:** Not really, within Irish folklore, however, you do have a phenomenon peculiar to Irish tradition. For whatever reason, the Irish never, ever developed the notion of the devil being the Omnipotent who will eventually get you and finish you. We don't have that "hostile devil" cult. The devil, in Irish folklore, is more of a joke.

**Dunc:** Well Miceal, on behalf of my fellow Canadian storytellers I want to thank you for sharing your thoughts with us and wish you well.

**Miceal:** Thank you Dunc.  
*Beannacht!*

Miceal Ross is an Irish storyteller, a professor of Irish Folklore, founder of The Storytellers of Ireland, and coordinator of the Dublin Yarnspinners. Miceal was in Vancouver at the end of May and gave a mini-course in Irish folklore which covered the main cycles, *The Red Branch Knights*, *The Kings*, *Finn MacCumbail*, and *The Mythological Cycle*. The ten hours of course time were generously sprinkled with Miceal's charismatic style of storytelling and the course was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

#### **A Few Comments From Some Who Took The Course:**

*Miceal opened the door to a storytelling tradition and the con-*

*nectedness of story to its place by honoring the ordinary voices of retellers to let in the undercurrents of laughter and daily doings of foible and impulse. These grow deeper meaning for the storyteller. I had a fabulous, fabulous time in this course.*  
Johanna Kuyvenhoven, Storyteller

*What a delight to spend two days inside the mind of such a scholar of Irish Folklore.*

Margaret Read MacDonald,  
Storyteller.

*Miceal Ross's course on Irish folklore is story masquerading as history. For two days I had the great privilege of having my faith restored in the art of listening. Miceal's absolute faith in stories, in magic, in things of the other world, and in storytelling itself were absolutely contagious.*

Linda Stender , Storyteller.  
*P.S. Although the course was given in Vancouver, the interview took place at Miceal's house in Ireland, overlooking Dublin Bay.*

