

The Last King of Ireland

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



There is something magical about the notion of a king. The very mention of the word conjures images of castles, crowns, pageantry and, of course, great wealth and power.

In the case of the last king of Tory Island, however, none of these images apply. Patsy Dan Rodgers may very well be the last King of Ireland. He had ruled his tiny kingdom of Tory Island starting in the 1990's until his death in 2018. It is not a hereditary title. He was elected by the people of Tory who can trace an unbroken lineage back to Saint Colmcille, who is said granted the first title to an islander in the 5th century. Since then, led by their Kings and at least one case a Queen, the Islanders have seen off Vikings, marauding Pirates, and invaders from the mainland.

Even on relatively calm days making the trip from the mainland to Tory Island can be an adventure or challenge. The ferry is the islander's lifeline. In the harsh winter gales, the islanders can be cut off for weeks. Most days when the ferry gets in and docks, the King is waiting to greet the arrivals. He greets visitors with the usual céad míle fáilte or just fáilte.

The door to the Kings house is always open accepting many visitors.

Tory Island is 9 miles from the mainland. It is a small, 1 mile wide by 2 miles long off the north-west coast of Co. Donegal and is the most remote inhabited island of Ireland. Tory is Irish for Pirate. Approximately 120 people live a precarious existence on the island which has 2 villages called East town and West town. The Island has a light house, church, health center, school and a shop which doubles as a post office, a hotel and social club. Tory is a Gaeltacht region, and the king often thinks in Irish, even when he speaks English. Catholic church services are spoken and sung in Irish. Music is the life blood of the island. The King, Patsy Dan, is a painter by trade, has been playing the accordion for longer than he cares to remember. He plays his accordion during church services. Patsy Dan is a stocky little man, wears the traditional uniform of a neatly ironed white shirt, striped tie, and a double-breasted navy-blue nautical jacket. His ears are adorned with four gold earrings, 3 in the left and 1 in his right. Maintaining traditions on the island is just one aspect of Patsy Dan's role as the King. The tradition is that every generation would appoint an islander a King. This brings a richness to the island and to the community. He is also a figure head, an ambassador, for his people of Tory. In his role as promoter of the island, he developed a particular talent for befriending wealthy and influential individuals and persuading them to take an interest in Tory. Throughout the year the cream of Irish musicians and singers make the journey to Tory from all over the world. Many just to say that they played with the King. As a musician, he was a performer, who could build a rapport with an audience with a gift of getting them dancing.

Besides the rich music culture, Tory's islanders are known for their art. The Islands small art gallery is a stone's throw from the ferry pier. Art helps to promote Tory Island. The artists of Tory island are not formally trained. Their work known as 'primitive painting' has become well known in the art world and is in great demand. Patsy Dan began painting in the 1970s and has exhibited works in Belfast, Dublin, Edinburgh, and Paris. His paintings depict life on Tory, including difficulties of life on the island during the winter months.

The old way of life on the island has changed though. The days of making a livelihood from fishing and farming are over. The island community has made significant progress in services for tourism, education, and health. And the King is looking forward to a brighter future. Traditions or 'old ways' are still maintained on the island such as the Easter parade. Early Easter morning the parade will stop to play music outside of older people's homes on the island for those who cannot get out and about.

Every summer on Saint John's eve, traditional bonfires blaze across Tory Island. Patsy Dan has the honor of lighting the bonfire outside the social club. Now it is time for the céilidh (pronounced kaylee) where the islanders waltz around tables piled high with plates of lobster, sea trout and shellfish to the sound of fiddles and accordions which will play until the wee hours of the morning.

In the distance you may hear a bell ringing from the HMS Wasp. Tory Island was not a stranger to the Land War of the 1880's that was engulfing the mainland. Police and military were often used to enforce evictions by landlords, who were predominantly Anglo-Irish and often absentee. The story goes back to 1884. The islanders were warned by British officers that the British warship, the HMS Wasp, would be sent out to collect unpaid taxes owed to an English landlord. The islanders said that they would resist. Legend has it three men deployed a 'cursing stone' to the lighthouse and requested the curse. The British claim that the lighthouse light was not lit when the ship struck a reef near the Tory lighthouse at 3:55am. Six men survived the wreck with the remaining fifty-two of their ship mates, including Captain Nicholls, perished. Some speculate that a skilled navigator like Captain Nicholls would not have crashed if there was a proper light source from Tory light house. Others speculate, some of the islanders fearful of eviction, used the cursing stone's magical properties to sink the HMS Wasp. Folklore links the 'cursing stone' to Saint Colmcille. Folklore also has the cursing stone helping defeat an earlier invading English raiding party in the 1600s.

Just as Patsy welcomes visitors to the island, he is there to say slán abhaile (safe home) or slán go fóill (goodbye for now) when the ferry departs. Over his last few years Patsy had been in the battle of his life. He was diagnosed with cancer and fought a brave fight for many years. The legacy he leaves behind is his dear wife, and family, his art and music and dear community. Patsy Dan Rodgers, possibly the last king of Ireland, died October 2018 at the age of 74.