

## FOREWORD

*Shane Howard*

**M**y family grew up in South West Victoria, Australia. It's the same country as Regina Lane and her family. We know how the dark chocolate coloured soil underlies the luminous green velvet fields that roll down from lakes of Tower Hill to the dunes and shores of the sometimes placid and sometimes tempestuous Southern Ocean. We know the same feeling of the stinging rain lashing your face in the wild winds and dark depths of winter. We know the vigorous Sou'Westerlies of Spring that blow in from the Antarctic circle, filling the sky with fast moving clouds that create the play of Sun and shadow on the hills and blow the Winter away. We know the grip of Summer sunburn and sea salt, potatoes and milk, benedictions and first communions, incense and the rich theatre of Irish Catholic ritual.

In this book Regina details her family's journey from their farming life in Ireland, through the desperate days of the emigration driven by Ireland's Great Famine, to farming in Australia and building a new life in a new land.

I know Regina's family story well. It echoes my own. In fact when her parents, Mick and Loretta returned to Ireland to trace and visit their ancestral lands, the ancestral Lane farm was neighboured by the Maddens. The Maddens were my ancestors, who came from the same area around Killaloe and Ballina in County Clare.

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It's not surprising really. So many of the original Irish settlers in South West Victoria would come from a particular area and would travel on the same boat. Chain migration would then follow as those who settled wrote back to Ireland and encouraged relations to follow. This is the story of so many of the Australians of Irish descent, in this part of the World.

I have read that South West Victoria, around the Koroit, Killarney, Tower Hill, Illowa, Crossley, Yambuk, Port Fairy, Dennington and Warrnambool areas, was the highest concentration of Irish in Australia, outside of the major cities.

Regina's story is a personal journey into the heart of her family culture and her Irish historical culture and what it means to keep that alive or try to give it meaning in an Australian landscape in the twenty first century.

But the bigger questions of church and faith, colonisation and community occupy her mind as well and move from the fringes initially to the centre stage of her thinking. Questions of justice arise, against the backdrop of a Catholic Church in crisis, reeling from the consequences of child sexual abuse.

The Lane family have been stalwarts of the local community since they first arrived here in the mid-nineteenth century. Regina's Mum and Dad have been pillars of the local Church community. Devout, but not pious, they have been examples of the very best of what it means to live a Christian life. Regina's Mother, Loretta, scrubbed and cleaned floors in the Church for years and years. She washed and cleaned and with her husband Mick, helped maintain St. Brigid's church and surrounds, perpetually. Loretta would do twenty good deeds for other people in a normal week and think nothing of it. You wouldn't know it. She wouldn't make a big deal of it.

Regina's mother is a bridge between the world of my Mother's generation and later generations. She carries so much of the long story and the social and historical map of the district in her head, in the same way as those older generations of women have done, since time immemorial, when they

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gathered in a huddle, at funerals and social gatherings, to draw and redraw the map of the district.

That world sometimes feels like it's vanishing now in this faster era of easy transportation and digital transmission. It was a smaller world back then, of local interactions, dramas and celebrations, where everyone knew everyone else and looked out for each other. It was still filled with petty jealousies and all the drama that human life entails but there was an understanding of the interconnectedness of everyone's long family stories.

Regina grew up in the thick of this deep well of Irish Catholicism and the never-ending talk and the manners and customs and old superstitions. That world, although it changes, still lives on in the digital age, for we are social beings and need each other to make our story and connect it together. The community around St. Brigid's still holds those memories of earlier times and traditions.

In 1993, Mary Black popularised my song, *Flesh and Blood*, in Ireland. It began for me a series of journeys to Ireland and beyond and a cultural awakening and a deepening sense of my ancestry and my own indignity. Aboriginal Australia had awoken that curiosity in me, in the early 1980's.

It coincided with my returning to live in South West Victoria in 1993, eventually shifting back to Killarney in 1998 where I began work on my album, *Clan*, which sought to connect all these old threads together again and celebrate, in song, the rich cultural tradition that we had grown up in.

I was delighted to discover that there was a fellow called Tommy Carty running traditional Irish music sesions in Warrnambool, Port Fairy and the Killarney Hotel. There were wild nights too in John O'Toole's Shed which was decorated with much of the religious paraphernalia that had come from the decommissioned St. John's church in Dennington, including the old altar that served as a bar. Some great Irish musicians have graced the St. Brigid's church and hall in the intervening years; Mossie Scanlon, Jackie Daly, Steve Cooney, Seamus Begley, Brian Kennedy, John Spillane, Liam

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O'Maonlai, Martin O'Connor and Mary Black, who has been a generous and ongoing supporter of the campaign to save St. Brigid's.

In 2000, at the encouragement of Phillip Moore, my wife and I convened a meeting of the Australian Irish Association of South West Victoria, in Killarney and called together many of the elders of the old families of the district. We asked those old people what they wanted and they were unanimous in wanting their story told and remembered. It was this imprimatur that sanctioned much of the drive of the campaign to save St. Brigid's.

My wife, Teresa O'Brien, was elected secretary of the Friends of St. Brigid and took a central role in the organisation of the campaign to Save St. Brigid's. I knew she was an extraordinarily capable woman but it was the first time I saw my wife in full flight. She'd been involved with her sister in the campaign to support the Mirrar people of Arnhem Land to protect Jabiluka from uranium mining in the 1990's. She was from a family of thirteen, so she knew how to organise and she wasn't afraid of a fight, in the struggle against injustice.

The campaign to try and save St. Brigid's church and the adjoining hall from passing into private ownership, wasn't easy. There was a human cost. The campaign took a huge toll on so many of those involved. It placed a great strain on families and had the capacity to divide the community.

I was in Ireland, in Kildare, at St. Brigid's Well in the crucial twenty four hours before the sale that would decide the future of the St. Brigid's precinct. I met with the Brigidines there. Prayers were offered. Promises were made to bring the eternal flame of St. Brigid from Kildare to Crossley, if the church was saved, to light our own eternal flame. The symbolism was powerful. The fear of losing our community property was real.

We, the descendants, felt that we owed it to our ancestors to keep the precinct in the care and ownership of the community. 'Has to be something worth fighting for', said the words in Let The Franklin Flow, the song I

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had penned in 1983 to help stop the damming of Tasmania's wild river. My song, Solid Rock, had championed the cause of Aboriginal Australians who had been colonized and dispossessed of their homelands with the arrival of Settler Cultures.

This was our sacred ground. If we couldn't protect our own heritage then all our history counted for nothing. We would be culturally bereft and adrift, without an anchor point. This was a spiritual home for our old people and our young people and we had to show them that we cared. We were also deeply aware that Irish history is also littered with heroic failures.

At one level, this is just a little local story. But as the brilliant Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh says in his poem, Epic, when a local feud over land appeared insignificant against the emerging tide of the Second World War, or, 'the Munich bother', as he called it,

*'...Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind  
He said: I made the Iliad from such  
A local row. Gods make their own importance'*

Regina has wrapped all of this local history and culture and struggle up into the loving bundle of words that make up this book and the story transcends 'a local row' to ask the bigger questions about justice and culture, faith and community and the importance of the spirit of place.