

Report: From Wexford to Féile Tilting 2009



Feile Tilting 2009 was a gathering to promote understanding and cultural exchange amongst our Irish communities, and it was certainly an opportunity to strengthen our ties. I feel that this festival was a beginning for many more future annual events of its kind, and also provided for more of a long term relationship with our Ireland community.

Gerard Foley (Mayor)

Féile Tilting: it was a magical and memorable experience for all who participated in it, and one which many hope to be able to repeat in years to come.

The reasons for a Wexford contingent to be involved in such a festival were three-fold. Firstly, as outlined in the original proposal, it aimed to “promote understanding and cultural exchange amongst Irish Communities on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean.” The members of the visiting party were all from Wexford, and were very much aware of this mandate: to bring their respective knowledge of poetry, fiction, photography, storytelling and Sean Nós to offer workshops for festival participants and – importantly – to participate in and appreciate the Tilting community’s own rich cultural heritage, being celebrated at the festival. The coming together of both communities through culture, both in 2009 and the future, would build and maintain ties between Ireland’s South East region and Fogo Island.

In addition, it was hoped that the staging of such a festival in September would give a post-summer boost in trade and community income generally, since tourism and visitor volumes fall off at the end of August on Fogo. Bearing in mind the economic challenges that Newfoundland and unique communities like Tilting have undergone in the past almost twenty years, such a festival would perhaps especially welcome home expatriate Fogo

Islanders, who would appreciate a community-oriented festival with a cultural emphasis. As it turned out, this is exactly what Féile Tilting 2009 did.

Lastly, the visiting group would dedicate one morning on Fogo to visit the main primary and secondary school, “Fogo Island Central High”. There, the visiting group were able to carry out a rota-visit of all classes in the school, from infants to school-leavers.



Their workshops were a combination of readings of Irish and original literature, exercises, traditional storytelling circles and traditional Sean Nós sessions. This presented a blend of old and new cultural traditions for the students, and gave the children a varied and fresh taste of the heritage that forms the basis of their own Island culture. The morning was a tremendous success, with lively exchange and creativity at all levels of the school.

Attached the reader can find a schedule of the events, but let us briefly describe in a little more detail how the visit progressed.

I travelled to the festival to experience the culture first-hand and to have an opportunity to meet the people. For years, even since I first became aware of the connections between Fogo Island and the South-East, I had been anxious to make this trip. It was an unforgettable experience.

Eamonn Wall

The principle organiser on the Newfoundland side was Maureen Foley, and Newfoundlander Natalie Falk was also invaluable with advice and help. On the Irish side, the principal coordinators were Niall Wall, who had already worked with the Tilting community the previous year, and Helena Mulkerns, who has experience with arts events.



The final Irish group consisted of Wexford native Professor Eamonn Wall, poet and academic at the University of St. Louis, Missouri. Eamonn travelled from Missouri to participate in the event. Wexford resident Helena Mulkerns, a writer and photographer, and Deirdre Wadding, traditional storyteller and singer, travelled from Wexford, as did Niall Wall, Sean Nós singer, writer and publisher. The Ireland Newfoundland

Partnership generously provided funding in terms of travel expenses for the trip for Helena and Deirdre, who also benefited from a very kind private donation of funding from Mr. Walter Kirwan. Niall Wall, who was in Newfoundland to participate in the Festival of the Sea, kindly volunteered his services as Sean Nós specialist, and provided two workshops in the art, as well as his welcome participation in the various seisúins.



Upon our arrival on the island on Thursday, having travelled by car from St. John's, we had our first taste of Newfoundland hospitality in the form of a welcoming reception at the Fire Hall. This gave us a chance to chat with the organising team on Fogo, people from the community and discuss upcoming events.

For our first two nights, Deirdre and Helena were offered cosy accommodation at the Dwyer Fishing premises, which is a historic house converted as a showcase of the architectural and fishing traditions of Tilting. The house is a typical harbour dwelling, looking out over the quiet waters of "The Pond," Tilting's interior harbour, protected at its mouth by the low rocky pillar of Pigeon Island. This house won Newfoundland's Manning Award in 2005 as best renovated historical building. Eamonn and Niall Wall were housed in the Reardon Artists's Retreat House at Sandy Cove, another traditional dwelling which as been renovated as a retreat for writers or artists.



Friday morning was an early start, with Eamonn, Niall, Helena and Deirdre checking into Fogo Island Central High for the morning's workshops. The children, ranging from around 9 years to school-leaving age, were extremely attentive and cooperative. Some showed exceptional promise. Deirdre and Niall took on the younger children, while Eamonn and Helena worked with older students.

After lunch, the group headed over to Kenna's Pub, which has ample space in which to read and perform. Local poets such as Roy Dwyer and Robert Blake read, and there was



singing from local and visiting group members alike. Following an early supper at Nicole's Restaurant, Niall Wall gave a Sean Nós workshop, which segued into an evening session of song, music and recitation.

Saturday morning began with a lively traditional Irish breakfast – a welcome start to the day before the Storytelling, Creative Writing and Photography workshops. These went extremely well, with many participants at advanced levels of their art.



Those present at the photography workshop included Europeans, Canadian tourists, returned islanders, and others – all at various stages of photographic know-how, from complete beginners to accomplished photographers such as Gail Pendleton, publisher of "The Fogo Island Flame." The only downside following this workshop was that not many people forwarded their work afterwards to the workshop facilitator, Helena.



On Saturday afternoon the workshops continued, with Deirdre Wadding presenting a “Storyteller’s Circle”, Eamonn Wall facilitating a “Poet’s Circle” and Helena presenting a workshop entitled, “Editing and Preparing your work for Publication”. All were very well attended. The latter turned into a particularly rewarding and fruitful interchange about the advantages and disadvantages of “Publish on Demand”. The only downside was, again, that in the aftermath no work was submitted back to the facilitators which could be used in a proposed booklet for publication at a later date.

In Tilting ... there is an impressive sense of community which we in Ireland don't seem to nurture as much as we once did. There is a powerful sense of place and identity which is very moving to witness and experience.

Deirdre Wadding

At this point, it might be worth mentioning the very special, warm and friendly atmosphere that prevailed through all of the proceedings. People at each event were giving and cordial. The community radio broadcasts, facilitated by Fred Campbell of the Ryakuga Grassroots organisation and his student volunteers, echoed around the island, in cars, stores and bakeries. The whole island was very much involved in the festival, and the Tilting community was at the centre of it.

The idea behind the community radio was not to set up a station and “invite” guests on to speak, but to show the community members how to use the equipment and hand the station over to their direction – which they did willingly and with great accomplishment. All



members of the visiting group were honoured to be asked to interview with the station, and to read, tell a story or sing. Older community members told stories of the traditions of their younger days, and old stories from their childhood, and the appreciation of the younger generation was encouraging.

That evening there followed the “Traditional Newfoundland Supper,” served in St. Patrick’s Hall, and after that the night led on into “The Grand Session,” where all participants cosily crammed into the tables that dotted the hall, and listened to the



impressive array of talent that was present. Musicians – on fiddle, accordion, guitar, tin whistle and more played, while others sang. Both Helena and Deirdre participated in these sessions, as did several other Irish people – there on a visit for the festival, as well as islanders and returned ex-pats.

At mass the next morning, the second largest influence on the island community identity was evident, as the church crammed to the brim with parishioners and the extended flock present for the festival. Helena and Deirdre sang O’Riada’s “Ag Criost An Síol” and participated in other hymns along with the choir.

That afternoon, Rose Mary Burke, in typical generous Newfoundland spirit, loaned Deirdre and Helena her car so that they could do some visiting on the island.

Helena met with poet and writer Roy Dwyer and his wife Christine, who gave her some fascinating background into the culture of the island and its former glory as a fisheries centre. Roy displayed some salt cod samples, and dried capelin – the smaller fish that can be washed and then roasted in times of low cod supplies.

Later, Maxine Green and her husband Gerard were kind enough to invite Deirdre and Helena to their home for more conversation and some food. Their daughter Sarah – herself a promising young poet – then took the Wexford contingent on a wonderful walk along the shore, to see such attractions as The Devil’s Chair and The Washing Pond.



It was also fascinating to get a closer look at the famed stages and flakes of the Greene household. The stores (large over-water wooden sheds), stages (where the boats pulled in with their catches of cod) and flakes (where the salted cod were laid out to dry) are still preserved, and these wonderful outbuildings were captured by Helena’s camera, producing some of the photos that we are hoping to display next year.

The festival came to an end on Sunday with a slightly more formal concert than the previous evenings, with a more organised schedule and seats placed theatre-style as opposed to around tables.



Finally the evening ended with some speeches of appreciation, a prize-giving and thanks to all who participated. The festival officially came to a close around 11pm.

Conclusion

As a member of the organizing committee, I speak for all of us when I say that it far exceeded our expectations. Overall, the event met with tremendous success. E-mails and messages poured in from people all over the world, especially from expatriates. A lot of people traveled a fair distance to be home in Tilting for the event.

Maureen Foley

Overall, the visiting group felt that the trip was a rich and rewarding venture, well worth travelling to Newfoundland for. It seemed that the Tilting Community appreciated the visiting group, and were pleased with the festival as a whole. They told the visitors that the presence of Irish artists direct from the South East, from where their ancestors originated so long ago, was an appropriate touch, and many of them enjoyed either asking us questions, or telling us a selection of their own yarns from bygone days of Tilting.



It was inspiring and impressive to see the level of passion and dedication the Tilting Community devote to traditional Irish culture in the form of music, song, storytelling, poetry and memoir. It was also a lesson in community cultural development and outreach.



In terms of the various ongoing ideas generated as part of the festival that would follow up to present Fogo Island, Tilting to the best advantage in Ireland, we came up with a number of ideas in an attempt to “build a bridge” with the contacts and endeavours made during Féile tilting. The best and most likely to happen, however, is a photographic exhibition which would be held in 2010, to coordinate with the upcoming Ireland-Newfoundland Festival in September.

The Wexford Arts Centre has already committed to hosting such an exhibition, and we would hope to use the photos taken by Helena Mulkerns, along with text excerpts (and possibly some photos) from the fiction and poetry of Tilting writer Roy Dwyer. This would bring the both communities together in a pleasing format.

Ideally, once funding is secured to mount the exhibition in the Wexford Arts Centre, the exhibit could be moved to other centres around the South-East wherever the festival will be taking place.

It would thereby serve to showcase the new connections made not only during Féile Tilting 2009, but it would also publicize the upcoming Ireland-Newfoundland Festival 2010.

All of the visiting group from Wexford have made solid friends during their visit, and have expressed the wish to be involved in any future endeavours.

Further materials can be found attached to this report, and any questions may be directed to the writer of it at: helena@banshee.info

