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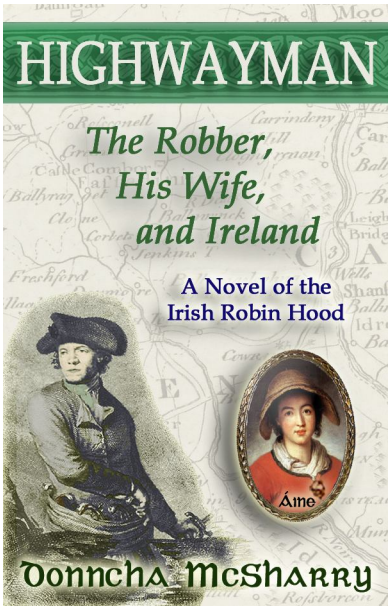

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irishhighwayman.com

IRISH HIGHWAYMAN JAMES FRENEY RIDES AGAIN

New Author Pens Novel about the Irish Robin Hood

Writer and first-time novelist Donncha McSharry has published a fictionalized version of the story of James Freney, a notorious Irish highwayman of the eighteenth century. *Highwayman: The Robber, His Wife, and Ireland*, tells the tale of the true-life adventures of Freney and his wife Áine, and the struggles of their lives. Ireland's forgotten hero gallops the roads of Kilkenny again in this tale of derring-do and destiny. The book presents the story from several points of view, including that of the authorities.

"I tried to stay true to the history," said the author, "but the novel is a bit fanciful too, I hope amusing at times, and I couldn't help but add some mysticism—for example, Ireland herself appears, in the form of Éiru, the old woman."

"Freney has appeared in fiction before," notes McSharry, "but this is the first full-length, fictional treatment of his life and adventures."

In this version of Freney's life, the novel pretends that it is a 1797 edition of Freney's autobiography—but this fictionalized edition lets his wife Áine have her say.

"She deserves a voice," McSharry asserts, "so this book fills the gaps in her story. She marries an ambitious young man, who starts out determined to succeed in business. When he takes to crime, how does she cope? What are her concerns about her young child? Here we see the story from her point of view as well."

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In history his wife played a crucial role in the trials that ended his larcenous career, but the details of her contribution have been lost. Here the author brings her to life. We see Áine McSorley growing up in Waterford, within the walls of the old city, the daughter of shopkeepers. She reads, keeps a diary, and avoids the ne'er-do-well city lads. Then one day an impetuous young man from across the river in County Kilkenny steps into the shop. As the robber's wife, and concerned for her young child's future, Áine makes plans behind the scenes, in convocation with her mother, her mother-in-law, and Mrs. Robbins of the Great House at Ballyduff, in a "conspiracy of the women" in the robber's life.

Freney himself descends from a noble family, dispossessed by the invading English. On the highway he remains a gentleman bandit, using his wits to evade capture, struggling against his chief pursuer (a landed gentleman magistrate), and fighting to instill in his gang his thieves' code of honor. Along the way he settles old scores, raids a jail, buys off judges and juries, and single-handedly shoots it out with the militia. Yet Freney never takes a life, always keeps up the appearance of respectability, and remains ever the courteous thief, willing to return money and objects of sentimental value to his victims, and always ready to help the poor.

For some time after his death, Freney lived on as the "Bold Captain Freney" of folktale, song, and literature. Generations of Irish school children read his autobiography in the countryside "hedge schools". To them he stood a hero, and his celebrity remained for some 150 years. In the eighteenth century the Irish knew Freney quite well. In the novel *Barry Lyndon*, the author William Makepeace Thackeray has Barry encounter Freney on the highway. And Percy French's comic opera, "The Knight of the Road, or The Irish Girl," features Freney. (In Ireland, the surnames French and Freney share the same origin.)

"But those works are over 100 years old," McSharry noted, "and alas, by the twentieth century the Irish had forgotten about Freney."

Other Irish highwaymen plagued the countryside in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, why write about Freney?

"We know the most about Freney because he wrote an autobiography," said the author, "And he's an ancestor, or so my maternal great-grandfather said to his children, and we have no reason to doubt it. My great-grandfather's name was James Franey too, although he spelled his name with an "a", like Americans do. And if we descend from the robber, so do we descend from his wife, and every bit as much, obviously. I'm proud to have given her a voice."

But is the author proud to have a lawbreaker in his background?

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"In the 1700's the native Irish lived under the Penal Laws. I don't blame Freney one bit," said McSharry. "He was careful to rob only from those who could afford to lose some money, and who otherwise deserved it. Well, most of the time, anyway," he added with a smile.

The Penal Laws prevented Ireland's economic advancement—serving the interests of her stronger neighbor and overlord, England. Seeking their own advantage, and fearing renewed rebellion in Ireland, the English crown and parliament enacted the infamous laws, which prevented the native Irish from various trades, professions, and industries. Thus stymied, some of the skilled and ambitious from among the Irish population took to crime.

McSharry added, "In Freney's case, at first he opens a pub in Waterford City, but he runs smack dab into two things: special regulations and fees for Catholics wishing to conduct a business, and his own pride. When the business collapses he takes his young family back to his home turf of Kilkenny, and when he runs out of money he takes to the highway."

Is there still a stigma attached to a self-published book such as this?

"I hope not. In my case I got tired of approaching publishers and literary agents, hat in hand. The publishers would say, 'get an agent, then let us know,' and the agents would say, 'get a publisher, then get back in touch'. With self publishing, the book can make its own way in the world," McSharry said. "I think someone needed to tell this story in this way, so here it is."

Is this book a bodice ripper?

"The novel does include the story of the love between the robber and his wife," said the author, "and I tried to make the love story touching and sweet. But they rip no bodices, nor even unlace any. Instead, the tale unfolds as the characters themselves tell it, and so I had to stay true to the voices of the time. For example, his wife Áine keeps a diary and writes letters—so we hear her voice through her writings—but no proper woman in the 1700's would put bedroom details to paper. She does write to her cousin Máire with some euphemistic references to the nuptial bed, but that's about it. One of my friends insisted that I add some bedroom scenes, but that would go against every fiber of my training in history. There's plenty of heavy breathing in any number of other novels with the word 'highwayman' in the title."

The author studied Irish history, holds an M.A., lived in Ireland for a time, and has visited many times since. After a career in technical writing the author returns home to Irish history.

Highwayman, by Donncha McSharry, is available from Amazon.com and Harvard Book Store.

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