

Small gems offer wealth of Irish humor, wisdom and poetry

By Janice Harayda

May the road rise up to meet this review, and may it be in heaven half an hour before the devil takes it to the recycling bin.

Yes, that sentiment takes a few liberties with a couple of toasts that tumble off the lips at this time of year. But why quibble? If you need the correct words, you can find them in Joan Larson Kelly's "Irish Wit and Wisdom" (Peter Pauper, 64 pages, \$4.95), a collection of miscellany in the spirit of St. Patrick's Day.



There are few certainties in publishing, but one of them is that St. Patrick's Day brings a green tide of small-format gift books that brim with Irish myths, history, folklore, humor, proverbs and trivia. Often decorated with ribbon bookmarks and sold at point-of-purchase displays, these offerings tend to get the cold shoulder from critics and others looking for the next "Angela's Ashes" or "How the Irish Saved Civilization." This fate may be too harsh for books that typically cost only \$5 or \$6 in hardcover.

The most distinguished publishers may hope that on St. Patrick's Day we'll all want to spend

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Janice Harayda is the author of the comedy of manners "The Accidental Bride." Her next novel is due out later this year.

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History and mystery

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NONFICTION

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KELLY:

Irish wisdom, humor and poetry

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time with the collected works of James Joyce or George Bernard Shaw, or at least with a promising first novel set in County Tyrone or Wicklow. But the editors of gift books know better: Many of us have enough trouble getting through "Finnegan's Wake" when we haven't had a glass or two of green beer. Focusing on a pillar of Irish literature may be impossible if the neighbors are singing "Danny Boy" or playing U2's "Joshua Tree" album at full blast.

Gift books may stand up better to the tests of St. Patrick's Day, and some have performed well enough to stay in print for years. Many are handsomely designed, a few come from well-known authors like Malachy McCourt, and the best provide a tasting menu of topics we can revisit after we've recovered from the indigestion brought on by too many slices of Irish-coffee cheesecake.

First, a caveat. "Small" doesn't always mean "easy" or "suitable for small-fry." Take "A Little Book of Irish Myths" (Apple, 60 pages, \$9.95), three tales from Irish folklore retold by Robert Welch, editor of "The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature." Sara Walker has illustrated the book with sunny, Impressionistic images that drop a veil over the savagery of the stories on its pages.

"A Little Book of Irish Myths" makes clear that—for sheer sadistic brutality—the titans of Irish mythology can hold their own against the arrogant and vengeful gods of ancient Greece, or the characters in a Mel Gibson movie. A king of Ulster punished one of his subjects by throwing him in a dungeon and forcing his pregnant wife to take part in a foot race against the royal horses. She won, then "collapsed and screamed out in pain as she writhed on the ground" before giving birth to twins. Later she struck back at the king by putting a curse on the men of Ulster. In these tales, vengeance takes the place of redemption, and the virtuous get their reward—if they get it at all—in heaven.

Not, you might think, a book to lift the heart on St. Patrick's Day. That may be its chief virtue. "A Little Book of Irish Myths" adds balance to the sentimental images fostered by "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and greeting cards that show leprechauns grinning at pots of gold. It also has a pro-

nunciation key that is no small asset when characters have names like Feidhlimidh mac Daill ("Filem-ee mock Dyle"), though the guide would have been more helpful if it had also shown the accented syllables.

Nobody risks stumbling across ghastly brutality in "Ireland" (Ariel/Andrews McMeel, 105 pages, \$5.95), a romanticized collection of one-to-a-page quotations edited by Sue Carnahan and illustrated by Steve McAfee. This book bristles with modern and pseudo-antique fonts superimposed on gauzy backgrounds that are so dark, many lines are difficult to read. Some of the quotations have a flavor more Scottish than Irish, as though the editors intended the book for the Scots-Irish, and others have unclear or tenuous links to the Emerald Isle. Might the editors have taken too much to heart a quote from Benjamin Disraeli, who called Ireland "that damnable, delightful country, where everything that is right is the opposite of what it ought to be"?

Less ambitious but more successful is "The Luck of the Irish" (Peter Pauper, 76 pages, \$4.95), a book of quotations compiled by Patrick Kennedy, Mark Anello and Jordan Hayes. As plain as a loaf of soda bread, it has no eye-catching design elements except for a 24-carat gold-plated shamrock charm at the end of a ribbon (which, the dust jacket notes, may be used "on a bracelet or necklace").

But "The Luck of the Irish" abounds with well-taken comments by authorities on its topic, including John Kennedy, Rev. Andrew Greeley and Rev. Joseph O'Hare, former president of Fordham University. A man from upstate New York reports that his brother Michael goes to as many as four or five funerals a week. He once asked his brother, "[W]ho's this one for?" Michael replied:

"That guy's father was our mailman when we were little. I think the family should be represented."

Perhaps the best all-around gift book is "Irish Wit and Wisdom," which has chapters on such topics as jokes, blarney, toasts, proverbs, sayings and folklore. This attractive volume also has the full text of 13 limericks, that delightful poetic form perhaps unsurpassed in its suitability for reciting at St. Patrick's Day parties. Its author wisely omits off-color examples and sticks to classics such as:

*There once were two cats of Kilkenny,
Each thought there was one cat too many;*



*So they scratched and they bit,
In a quarrelsome fit,*

'Til instead of two cats there weren't any.

"The Claddagh Ring" (Running Press, 127 pages, \$4.95) is a recent gift edition of a book that appeared last summer, and it includes a charm shaped like the Irish ring celebrated on its pages. Its author, Malachy McCourt, has won fame as an actor, the brother of Frank McCourt ("Angela's Ashes") and a memoirist ("A Monk Swimming"). Now he offers an informal biography of the popular ring that shows two hands clasping a heart topped by a crown.

"The Claddagh Ring" displays none of its author's wit, but wit isn't really his goal. In the most memorable section of the book, McCourt describes the role that the rings played in the search for survivors of the World Trade Center. Some news reports have suggested that 15 or 20 police and firefighters were wearing Claddaghs when they died. Others, no doubt, are wearing them today in their memory.

Among other potential gifts, few are worthier than a new facsimile of the first edition of William Butler Yeats' "The Tower" (1928), perhaps the finest book by the Nobel laureate and greatest Irish poet of the 20th Century. Yeats scholar Richard J. Finneran provides a helpful introduction and notes to this edition (Scribner, 134 pages, \$12 paper). And the cover illustration is based on T. Sturge Moore's elegant and haunting image of Ballylee Castle, where Yeats wrote many of its poems.

"The Tower" doesn't contain Yeats' most-famous poem, "The Second Coming," and its bleak portrait of an age in which "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Nor does it have his popular "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." But it includes such landmarks as "Leda and the Swan," "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Among School Children."

It also suggests why volumes like "A Little Book of Irish Myths" have value. The introduction to the facsimile edition of "The Tower" includes part of a letter in which Yeats reminds his illustrator: "As you know, all my art theories depend upon just this—rooting of mythology in the earth." The classic tales help us understand not just the ancients but the giants, like Yeats, who followed them. Some poets have an appeal that withers after they die. But the road keeps rising up to meet Yeats, and it's an open question whether, even now, the devil knows he's dead.

