

**Dr Jill Blee**

I was interested that a number have referred to the fact, that our families my family - your family were ordinary folk. People who did ordinary things, who came from ordinary backgrounds. It's one of the things that always concern me. One of the things that the young man, I didn't catch his name who's going to be the next Mayor commented that while history is written about the important men of history and we all learn that history it's the ordinary folk that make the history.

And that was in my mind when I set off to Ireland the first time I went. That it was ordinary family. I had a few bits of ordinary records. I had my grandparents marriage certificate which said that Patrick John O.Farrell had come from County Clare and that his parents Martin O.Farrell and Bridget Kane were farmers had come from County Clare but that's all it said.

I also had the death certificate of my great great-aunt Brigid who had who had brought my great grandfather, Patrick, to Australia, and I had her will ~ and that was important because Brigid had come at least ten years before Patrick, in fact she brought Patrick out.

We presume now she was one of the famine orphans those 4000 girls shipped out of the workhouses during the famine and so would have arrived extremely poor about in 1848 ~ 1850. By the time she brought Patrick, he was born after she left - he was born in 1852, by the time she brought him to Australia in the late 1860.s he was a lad of fifteen or sixteen and she was a wealthy woman. And we have speculated on how that wealth came about. She did own a drapery business - and three houses in Northcote.

She never married and my grandfather, Jack O.Farrell, assumed that, being the oldest nephew, he would inherit all this wealth when she died. Unfortunately for my grandfather and probably for my whole family she left all her money to her .servant. [and I say in inverted commas] of many, many years called; .Florrie Dick.. Florrie did well. I don't know whose family she belongs to - she didn't belong to ours. And Jack, being the hot-tempered man that he was wouldn't have Brigid's name ever mentioned in the house again.

Consequently, as none of my family know anything about Brigid except for the will and her death certificate ~ no photos ~ nothing I could invent Brigid to my heart's content - and I did. Brigid accompanied me on four journeys to Ireland as a ghost and she was a very interesting companion. But what, having Brigid with me, enabled me to do was to look at the history of her people in northwest Clare at the time before and during the famine. She'd come to some kind of understanding as to how traumatic that period was and the migration that followed it.

I could read all the records you like. When I first arrived in Dublin I went to most of the bookshops, I did the rounds, and those of you who have been in Dublin know what wonderful places the bookshops of Dublin are and how expensive they are, because you go away with armloads of books. I bought heaps of stuff and I hired a car. My intention was to drive clockwise around Ireland with Brigid.

And I read all along the way and the more I read the more I got to know what she had lived through.

But that wasn't enough. Because I was reading accounts that were written well after the event. Or if they were written during the event, they were written by people, who hadn't gone without, Government Officials, Clergymen, those intrepid British Travellers, all of those sort of people. They didn't experience the lack of potatoes the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Address given at the Carrucan Sesquicentenary, Eltham, Victoria, Australia, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2004.

Dr Frank Carrucan introduced Dr Jill Blee as follows: "She started out as a scientist. She did extensive research about Ireland in the mid 1800.s and Fanore in her historical novel Brigid. Jill's family were from Ballyvaughan which is the neighbouring village to Fanore so I'm sure that Jill is going to fascinate us with her talk".

something to eat. People who understood what a fungus was.

The more I thought about it I thought if you were an ordinary person who grew your potatoes, who lived your life, who grew other crops to pay the rent, raised pigs did all those things. How to you deal with a catastrophe of that measure hits you. You can't read the newspapers. You don't know that in the Botanical Gardens in Dublin, someone is experimenting with fungi and who knows a little about what a fungus is. You don't know that this plague has swept across from America has swept across Central Europe and has finally descended upon the potatoes of Ireland. You don't know those things and you can't know them because nobody is going to tell you and you can't read a newspaper and because most of you don't speak English anyway.

So what do you do? So that sent me thinking and looking. I could read heaps about the time in the Newspapers in the Local History Centre in Ennis where I bet many of you have been - a wonderful centre. I could get other information from other sources, from the National Library and so on. But that still didn't answer my question and the only way to get those answers was to talk, to listen to older people.

And as it happened, I found a couple of dear old souls who could remember what their grandmothers had told them around ~ and sure they embellished and I. probably they enjoyed it and cost me a lot of Guinness too. I couldn't tape anything because these people were not accustomed to that kind of thing, I couldn't write anything down. So one in particular, Martin Kerry was his name, I used to meet him every afternoon in O'Brien's pub and it helped. And when he had finished his Guinness, I'd say thanks very much Martin and I'd rush up to my room and write like the fury and try and get it all down. Many of the words he used were Gaelic, and so I then had then to approach Joseph who had taught Gaelic for eighty years or sixty years. He was eighty-four. He came in and gave me a quick lesson on Gaelic so that I knew what Martin was talking about. But in the process I learned a lot about individual people, about where things were. From the records, from Maureen Comber from the Local History Centre, and from the Corofin Heritage Centre I had got maps. I knew exactly where my family had lived, I knew whose Estate it was I was even able to find the Burren. And I was able to go down the Burren and identify the rooms of the house - because I knew who the neighbours were and I met one of those descendants who was able to say that one was ours that one was yours.

But that still didn't give me enough to put together what these people were like, to, put flesh and blood on these people. And so I needed to talk to people to what Martin Carey and Shaun O'Neill McLaughlin ~ Shaun McNeil O'Laughlan who owned a pub in Ballyvaughan, some of you may actually have been in it. I doubt if it's been dusted since the day when he took it over from his father. He must be nearly ninety now. And he told me wonderful stories. Some of them were fabricated.

But this question kept coming back to me. How do you deal with it when you haven't the knowledge we have? When you don't know about airborne diseases, when you don't know that the rest of the world is having the same problem? And that got me into superstition about thinking about it. Now all societies have ways of dealing with things they otherwise cannot understand, and the Irish are no exception. The Irish believe in superstition and curses, in black magic, in the same way as other societies did at the time. It provides the means to explain the otherwise unexplainable. So the Irish immediately saw their crops and wondered that they had done wrong, who was punishing them, why God was punishing them.

So I wanted to deal with that, with the notion of blame and fear and to learn more about how people addressed that. And I was able to speak with someone who knew all about that. Who had had made a study of it. And I discovered, and some of you may know this spot. Where the road, the New Quay Road turns around from ~ as it comes up from Bellharbour and turns round to Galway there's a swampy area and it's known as the *witches area* ~ because that's where woman without a husband had a problem. And so there were a group of these women who lived there ~ they did the dirty work slaughtered meat. They delivered babies who were conceived out of wedlock, they buried the dead, prepared the dead for burial, particularly if people had died not in a state of grace.

There were other women, who dealt with the good people. They delivered the good babies, the ones that had been

conceived properly. They prepared people for burial if they had lived a good and holy life and the priest was prepared to anoint them.

So I found out these things, things you wouldn't find in a history book, things that aren't important in the grand scale of things when you are writing the history of events that are happening to the nation.

And then to put it together I needed imagination and that I've always had plenty of. And so, by combining all of these things, all of this research that I've done, with my own imagination I developed Brigid into the kind of great-aunt that most of us forgot, you know that small sharp tongue Irish biddy.

And was able to tell the story of the famine in that area that was plausible that could have happened, that possibly did happen. Sure, I embellished it. That's what a storyteller does. But the facts are there. I'm sure the people at Fanore when they discovered the potatoes limp and black looked that morning would have looked to the corners of their fields to see who'd buried rotten eggs in their fields. Or started to lament over spoking sharply to their neighbour.

They would too have approached it the same way I think Brigid's family did. Because they had no other way of dealing with it until they discovered that over the next valley, over the next farm fence the potatoes had gone too

So I believe that we can tell the history of the ordinary folk by an imaginative re-creation.

To me it's something like the re-enactment villages, like Sovereign Hill for instance, which tries to show you what it was like at a particular period. We can do that with words by combining accurate research with a good imagination and coming up with a picture of what might have been, to give you a picture of the ordinary folk the folk that don't get a mention in the history books. They're just the crowd. So that's what I've done, and I've done it on several occasions and I guess I'll continue to do it in other stories.

But I'm most grateful to Jim and John and both Helens for listening to me, to enjoying what I've got to say and for inviting me here today. I've discovered that I share cousins with one lot of you. My mother worked with someone else, and that, although I'm not part of your family, I have found connections here and that's been wonderful. I'd like to thank you very much."

In her book *Brigid*, to which Dr Blee refers in her talk, she describes the actions of many rapacious landlords who would descend upon families and evict their tenants and destroy their cottages.



**The rocky Burren**