

Interview with History Hoydens Blog, November 28, 2006

HISTORY HOYDENS: *IN SUNSHINE OR IN SHADOW* is set in Victorian Ireland, and has a very Gothic feel to it. How did you become interested in this time period? What do you love about it?

CYNTHIA OWENS: I've always had a deep love for Ireland: its rugged coastline, its beautiful green fields; its music and poetry, myths and legends. Perhaps I was a faery in another life, or maybe it's the blood of a distant ancestor calling to me. And of course, there's nothing more irresistible than a romantic Irish accent.

As I delved into the history of the country, I began to realize just how cruel the tenant/landlord system was, particularly during the Famine. A landlord could just toss a family off his land on the whim of grazing a few more cattle, and there was nothing they could do about it. And yet, through it all, the Irish remained stubbornly determined to hang on to what was most important: family and heritage. Even after they fled their homeland, they clung to their Irishness in the face of deep prejudice.

HH: What do you like least about this period? Anything that constrained you or that you had to plot carefully around?

CO: Nothing in particular comes to mind. I had to be careful, though, in naming certain groups of rebels. From the Young Irelanders to the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army, each group was active in its own time, and I had to beware of naming a group that was out of favor, or hadn't been formed in 1850.

HH: What sparked this book? Was it a character? An historical event? A scene you just couldn't get out of your head?

CO: All three and more! My heroine, Siobhán Desmond, came into my mind as a valiant survivor of the Famine, a widow struggling to keep the tattered remnants of her family together after devastating losses and betrayal. She'd been battered by circumstances, yet remained strong, as witnessed when, at the beginning of the book, she begs for food from the landlord, yet retains enough of her pride to refuse to bed the man.

My hero, Rory O'Brien, was also clear in my mind when I started writing *IN SUNSHINE OR IN SHADOW*. A gambler returning to Ireland, he is seeking both revenge and redemption. He certainly doesn't expect to find love, friendship, or the first real home he's ever known.

The village of Ballycashel became very real to me during the writing of the book, too. The spirit of the community in *SUNSHINE* is almost a character in itself, from the Ballycashel stables to Siobhán's cottage, to the shores of Ballycashel lake. And I really love the secondary characters: Grannie Meg, the village matriarch; Tom and Nora Flynn, Siobhán's best friends. And the two girls, Katie and Ashleen, became as real to me as my own daughter.

HH: Did you have to do any major research for his book? Did you stumble across anything really interesting that you didn't already know?

CO: I feel like I've been researching historical Ireland all my life! But I did find some very interesting tidbits about Irish celebrations. Every Irish man, woman and child loves a *ceilidh*, right? There are a few of these big parties in *SUNSHINE*, as well as Saint Brigid's Day (Feb. 1, the traditional day to start spring planting), and the Ballycashel harvest *ceilidh*. And each of these celebrations have their own traditions, from the "Bridie Boys" going from house to house asking for donations of food for "Poor Biddy," to throwing butter and a horse harness into the nearest body of water to ensure good fortune and plenty of food for the coming year.

HH: Any historical mea culpas to fess up?

CO: None that I know of.

HH: What/Who do you like to read?

CO: For historical romance, you can't beat a story by Mary Jo Putney and Teresa Medeiros. I love Mary Jo's skillful way of working odd historical facts into her stories, as well as her "tortured heroes." And Teresa has a way of writing poignant yet humorous stories that keep me either laughing or on the verge of tears. I think it takes a very special talent to achieve that reaction from readers.

I also enjoyed Edward Rutherfurd's *Princes of Ireland/Rebels of Ireland*. And any book – fiction or non-fiction, historical to present-day – about Ireland. I love Maeve Binchy's stories about coming of age in 1950's Ireland.

HH: How did your writing career take off? Was it a Zero-to-Published kind of thing? Or did you have ten finished books under the bed before you sold?

CO: *SUNSHINE* is my first book, so I'm not sure if my writing career has really "taken off" yet! But it's not the first book I've written. I wrote another Irish book set against the 1916 Easter Rebellion (past-1900 – *not* a popular time period!). Then I wrote a story set in Victorian-era Montreal, with yet another Irish hero. A third manuscript followed, set against 17th-Century New France. Finally, I decided to write what was really the "book of my heart," and *IN SUNSHINE OR IN SHADOW* was born.

After I finished *SUNSHINE*, I decided that for my New Year's resolution, I would either submit to one publisher or one contest each month. Highland Press was the third publisher I submitted to, and the only one to request a full manuscript. Less than six months later, I got an e-mail offering me a contract. And I've been walking on air ever since!

HH: Care to share a bit about your writing process? Are you a pantsier or a plotter? Do you write multiple drafts or clean up as you go?

CO: I think I'm a little bit of both, with a sprinkle of intuition thrown in. I usually start with a character – in this case, Rory O'Brien, a man with too many secrets and too much emotional baggage, who fled America and its memories to return to the place that held both his past and his deepest pain. As I asked him questions about himself, I slowly learned his back story, and how his tainted past would affect the woman he would come to love.

Enter Siobhán Desmond, a widow whose husband and adored younger brother were hanged by the local landlord. Their crime? Robbing a wagon of food that was being transported to England, when most of the villagers had lost their crop. How could Siobhán forget the sight of these two beloved bodies swinging from the Hanging Tree? How could she grow to love Rory, whose unholy connection to the landlord only a few people knew?

This story was so real to me, there were times I actually dreamed about it! One morning I awakened with a picture in my head so clear that I had to rush into my office and write it down. That picture became the pivotal scene in which Rory returns to the tiny cottage where he and his mother spent the first ten years of his life with his abusive stepfather.

I usually write the first draft, then clean it up once the storyline is complete, adding and/or deleting scenes as needed.

HH: What are you planning to work on next?

CO: Well, I have two sequels planned for *SUNSHINE*. The first, which is in its final draft, involves Siobhán's headstrong daughter, Ashleen. Fresh from a year in America, she returns to Ireland with a beau, the dashing Cavan Callaghan, hero of the Irish Brigade, who is coming home to claim the family he's never known. After that will come Katie's story, which is now in the planning stages. Rory's beautiful daughter decides it's time to meet her mother's family, so she travels to Baltimore, where she falls in love with a dashing young actor.

After that, I have a series of novels planned that will all be loosely connected. The heroes met on a "coffin ship" bound from Ireland to America during the Famine (more Irish heroes!). They grew up in New York together, and when the Civil War came along, all of them joined up to fight with the Irish Brigade. After the war, they come home to pick up the threads of their lives, and that's when all the fun will begin!

Interview with Celtic Hearts Romance Writers, Author of the Month, December, 2006

CHRW: Does this story have a Celtic element? If so what is it and why do you like it?

CO: Well, it's set in Ireland in 1850. I don't go too heavily into the mystical side of things, but there is definitely an Irish "feel" to the story. I didn't rely too much on Gaelic phrases or too heavy an Irish accent. I wanted to give the story an Irish "flavor" without letting the reader get bogged down in the details – or try to figure out some of the mysterious Irish pronunciation!

CHRW: What unique qualities do the characters in this story have?

CO: I think all the characters in my story are unique – at least I hope they are – for different reasons. Siobhán is unique in that she'll brave anything to save her family – even if it means begging from the man she hates above anyone else. She's the mainstay of the community, the one resident of Ballycashel Village who has suffered the most during the years of starvation and futility – not to mention the tyranny of the callous landlord.

Rory, on the other hand, is slightly more quirky. A leg wound suffered before coming to Ballycashel has forced him to use a cane. But he doesn't own just one cane: he owns fifty-seven! I must admit had a great time researching different antique canes. Two of Rory's favorites are a "dicer's cane," with a pair of dice encased in the head, and a cane that holds a concealed compass in the head. I love researching odd fact like this!

One of my reviewers compared the village of Ballycashel to another character in itself, which is immensely flattering. Particularly during the Famine and immediately after, the survivors of starvation had to draw closer in order to survive, and I think the many residents of Ballycashel, in doing so, did become almost a unique character in itself.

CHRW: Why did you become a romance writer?

CO: I first started reading romances when I was a teenager. I discovered a book called Mavreen, by a wonderful English author, Claire Lorrimer. A sweeping historical romance set against the French Revolution, I was swept away by its scope and its wonderful characters – and its history. I've loved to write since I was a child, and I knew in that instant that historical romance was what I wanted to write.

CHRW: Which comes to you first, the plot or the characters?

CO: With *IN SUNSHINE OR IN SHADOW*, it was the characters. I "knew" Siobhán and Rory right from the start; I just had to figure out what their story was. I pictured Siobhán as a desperate widow in a village devastated by starvation and disease, a strong woman forced to do almost anything to salvage the shattered fragments of her family. Rory was an expatriate Irishman who was haunted by the ghosts of his past. He needed to return to the place of his birth in order to lay those ghosts to rest. Of course, neither of these wounded people had any idea they would fall passionately, desperately in love – a love that seems doomed by both their past and their present.

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