

Athenry

An Odyssey of Sacrifice,
Survival, and Love



Cahal Dunne

‘An epic story! A delightful read, with a poetic flow.’
Malachy McCourt, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

‘An historical romantic novel, which for 175 years
has begged to be written. Dunne’s *Athenry*
puts a human face on the Irish Famine,
in an odyssey of sacrifice, survival, and love.’
Adrian Flannelly, “Dean of Irish Radio”
New York Newsday

‘1840s Ireland was a country rife with absolute cruelty and
horror. Somehow love managed to stay alive there.
Dunne’s *Athenry* captures this masterfully.’
Phil Coulter, Irish Music Legend and Author

‘What a great story of redemption. Liam O’Donoghue, our
hero, is a man whom I’d be proud to have on my team any
day. This book is so good, it screams for a sequel.’
Rocky Bleier, Former Pittsburgh Steeler,
author, and Vietnam Veteran

‘Congratulations! You have hit the ball right out of the
park. This is Ireland’s history, culture, and lore, in an
easy readable form, and is a must for everyone. I loved it!’
Seamus Mulligan, President Emeritus Irish Cultural
Center, Canton, MA. Irish Radio Host WROL Quincy, MA

‘I loved it! It is one of those stories that I found hard to put
down. It was emotional, exciting, and there was so much
anticipation, lots of action.
Liam O’Donoghue was some man!
WHAT A MAN!!!
Diane Byrnes, *Echoes of Erin*, KDW Radio Host,
Pittsburgh, PA

‘*Athenry* brings to life the tragedy and triumphs
of Ireland’s darkest hour,
through the hearts and minds of a young family.’
Pamela Rhodes, Retired TV Executive

ATHENRY

A Novel by Cahal Dunne

Athenry [AthenRYE] is a medieval town in
County Galway about 16 miles east of Galway City.

Some of its attractions are its medieval wall,
Athenry Castle, its priory wall,
and its Anglo-Norman street plan.

It is best known for a song written by Pete St. John called
The Fields of Athenry.

The song has become widely known and loved
by the Irish at home
and by those displaced in the Irish diaspora.

It's a song about a fictional man who lived near Athenry.
He stole some of his landlord's food to save his
starving wife and child
during the Irish Famine of the 1840s,
and was sentenced
to the Australian Penal Colony of Botany Bay.

This book was inspired by Pete St. John's iconic song.
I hope I have done it justice.

Between 1788 and 1886, approximately 164,000 convicts -
80% men, and 20% women, were transported to the Penal
Colonies in Australia, from England and Ireland. Fewer
than 5% of them made it home.

This book is my tribute to the strength and forbearance of
the Irish race, as told through the lives of two families so
terribly affected by the Penal Laws. The Laws put into
motion the downhill slide into the Famine, or the more
historically-accurate term, the Great Hunger. Everything
the Irish might have used to be able to fight the Famine
had been taken from them.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE FAMINE:

“The Penal Laws dating from 1695, and not repealed in their entirety until Catholic emancipation in 1829, aimed at the destruction of Catholicism in Ireland by a series of ferocious enactments, provoked by Irish support of the Catholic Stuarts after the Dutch William of Orange, a Protestant, was invited to ascend the English throne in 1688. England now faced the greatest Catholic power in Europe - France.

At this critical moment in history, the Catholic Irish took up arms in support of the Stuarts. James II’s standard was raised on Irish soil, at the battle of the Boyne near Drogheda, on July 1, 1690. James II was defeated.

The threat to England had been alarming, and vengeance followed. Irish intervention on behalf of the Stuarts was to be made impossible forever, by reducing the Catholic Irish to helpless impotence. They were, in the words of a contemporary, to become ‘insignificant slaves, fit for nothing but to hew wood and draw water,’ and to achieve this object, the Penal Laws were devised.”

Cecil Woodham-Smith

British Historian, 1896 - 1977

How is it said in Ireland?

Pronunciations of Irish names, places, and terms are written phonetically throughout the text. They are also located in alphabetical order on the last page of the book.

THE PENAL LAWS 1695 - 1829

- ❖ The Irish Catholic was forbidden to exercise his religion.
- ❖ He was forbidden to receive education.
- ❖ He was forbidden to enter a profession.
- ❖ He was forbidden to hold public office.
- ❖ He was forbidden to engage in trade or commerce.
- ❖ He was forbidden to live in a corporate town, or within five miles thereof.
- ❖ He was forbidden to own a horse of greater value than five pounds.
- ❖ He was forbidden to purchase land.
- ❖ He was forbidden to lease land.
- ❖ He was forbidden to vote.
- ❖ He was forbidden to keep any arms for his protection.
- ❖ He was forbidden to hold a life annuity.
- ❖ He could not be a guardian to a child.
- ❖ He could not attend Catholic worship, and would be fined for missing Protestant services.
- ❖ He could not himself educate his child.
- ❖ It was against the law to speak or write in the Irish language.

This book is a work of fiction.
Though some characters, incidents, and dialogue
are based on historical record,
the work as a whole is a product of the writer's
imagination.

In memory of my brother Des.
We miss you.

This book is dedicated to all first responders,
our son Ryan among them, who put their lives
on the line for us worldwide every day.
Thank you all.

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ATHENRY

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PART ONE

They Called Him Horse

Ireland 1843

“Horse” is what everyone called him, except his mother of course. Learning to ride Connemara ponies almost before he could walk, together with his seemingly natural-born skill with horses, earned Liam O’Donoghue this nickname.

Galloping astride Bridgee [BridgeEE], his beloved Connemara pony, Liam scanned the craggy rocks at the edge of the beach. He knew he’d see his brother rowing on the choppy waters, fishing for their landlord’s daily meals. Today the surf seemed unusually wild and rough, with the winds picking up by the minute.

His family, once proud landowners, but now dispossessed of everything they owned, lived at their master’s whim in a small thatched cottage on a tiny piece of land allotted to them by their landlord. They survived on their annual crop of potatoes, buttermilk, and a few roaming chickens.

From atop the cliff, Liam spotted Colum [KULLum] rowing in with his catch about a quarter of a mile offshore in his canoe-like, black currach [KURruck]. Colum saw Liam and waved.

Looking farther out, Liam saw a huge rogue wave barreling toward Colum. Frantic, he waved in warning. Not understanding the danger Liam was trying to convey, Colum nonchalantly waved again.

Liam shouted, “Get up girl,” urging Bridgee forward. She took off in a massive burst of speed, furiously jumping stone walls and ditches as they neared the beach.

The menacing mountain of water continued to roll in. Almost as if in slow motion, the currach was lifted to the peak of the wave and then flung, toy-like, into a massive churn of white foam. Helpless within the overpowering swirl, Colum was swallowed by the sea.

Resurfacing, his arms flailing above his head, and gasping what could be his last breath, Colum was pulled under again.

Pulse quickening and heart pounding in fear, Liam rode Bridgee to the water's edge. Leaping off the still-moving horse, he ran the length of the rocky beach, tripping over rocks. Then, trying to keep his balance in the loose sand, Liam stumbled as he shed his heavy boots and waistcoat. His strong legs carried him to the water's edge where he came to a halt to watch for Colum to resurface...if at all.

"Colum! Colum!" he screamed, his voice lost in the roar of crashing waves. Scanning the waterfront to his right, Liam caught sight of the overturned currach as it smashed against the rocks. The shoreline's sharp rocks bit into the soft flesh of his feet as he continued to search. "Coluuuuum!" *Oh God, Colum!*, he thought. *No, God no!*

Was he hallucinating, or did he see a spot of white? Or was it sea foam? He stared at the spot about fifty feet out, and again it bobbed into view. It was Colum's thick woolen jumper [Irish sweater]. Liam dove in, his system so brutally shocked by the freezing seawater that it took his breath away.

Liam loved looking at the sea with all its different moods, but hated being in it. The coastal waters never got warm and were always a numbing 50 degrees or colder. It was only at the insistence of their father that the O'Donoghue brothers had learned to swim. Too many of Tomás's [TomAUS] good friends were lost at sea because they had never bothered to learn to swim. 'What's the point in delaying the agony when there's no hope of being rescued? Just get it over with,' was their attitude. So Tomás was adamant that his sons learn at least the basics, just in case.

Fighting the strong current, Liam was glad that he could swim, but a champion swimmer he certainly was not. Angry now that he hadn't spent more time practicing, Liam feared whether he could even reach Colum, let alone save him. Stroking furiously, and not making any great progress, he swam and kicked harder. Exhausted, waves pounding him from every direction, he stopped to regroup, and floated momentarily to look for his brother's jumper.

Floundering and virtually paralyzed by the cold, Liam was lifted up by an enormous wave, and was demoralized to see Colum far out and off to his left. Barely able to lift his arms and kick his legs, he knew that he now was in deep trouble himself and losing his battle against the frigid water.

Frantic thoughts screamed in his head. *I need to save myself. But what'll I say to Mam and Da? "Colum drowned, and I didn't save him." Their lives would be over. I have to try to save him, no matter what.* Mustering what was left of his flagging strength, he stroked and kicked his way toward his brother and finally reached him floating face down.

Grasping Colum's jumper, Liam turned his limp body over, looked up to see which direction he needed to head for, and pulling Colum with one hand, began what seemed impossible — getting them both back to shore.

Somehow, the thought of Colum having any hope of living, gave Liam the last bit of strength he needed to stroke the water with one hand and kick his feet as hard as he could. Taking advantage of the swell of two incoming waves, he slowly swam the last few yards, until finally, his feet touched ground. Liam crawled the last few feet, dragging his motionless brother to safety, and collapsed beside him.

Though the cold wind pierced Liam's wet clothes and he began shuddering violently, the gut-wrenching fear of losing his brother jolted him back to the task at hand — reviving him. He fought the paralyzing numbness of the cold and frantically pounded on Colum's chest as hard as he could. He had learned this technique from saving many a newly-born heifer as it emerged from its mother unconscious. "Push all the liquids out of their lungs and allow them to breathe," was what his father had taught him.

"Colum come on! Come on!" Liam rolled Colum onto his side to help clear his lungs, then continued pounding. After what seemed a lifetime, Colum, bleeding badly from a head wound, spewed a mouthful of saltwater and his eyes fluttered open. Then, grimacing in pain, he coughed violently, purging the last bit of water from his burning lungs, and regained consciousness.

Relieved, Liam pulled his brother into his chest, "That's it Colum, good man. Get it up, get it up, good man." Then smiling through tears, he ripped a strip of cloth from the hem of his shirt and tied it around the gaping gash in his head, to staunch the bleeding.

Liam whistled for Bridgee. "Down girl," he commanded, and obediently she folded her forelegs and moved onto her knees. Liam was never more thankful that he had taught Bridgee to do this, a

movement that amazed his family. He carefully lifted Colum up to straddle Bridgee. “Up girl,” he commanded and, walking beside Bridgee while steadying Colum in the saddle, headed home.

The family cottage in sight at last, Liam saw his mother Josie hanging out the washing, her apron billowing in the breeze. Glancing up when she heard Bridgee’s approach, she gasped when she saw Colum slumped over the horse. “Oh, Mother of God,” she cried, blessing herself. She ran toward them screaming, “What happened? What happened?”

“A huge wave hit the currach, and Colum was thrown over against the rocks.” Liam gently slid his groaning brother down onto his shoulder and carried him inside.

Josie, shocked at the sight of her two boys — Colum groaning in pain and Liam, wet, shivering and exhausted — calmed her nerves and took control. She shouted orders to her two young daughters as she helped carry Colum into the cottage and laid him on the bed. “Brid [Breed] get Mrs. O’Flaherty. Go on now! Hurry up girl. Tell her to come as fast as she can. Aoife [EEfah], get some blankets and wrap them around the both of ’em. Give Liam some hot tea and put some poitin into it to warm him up.” [potCHEEN, Irish moonshine]

Skillfully, Bríd jumped up onto her brown Connemara pony, Saoirse [SEARshah, meaning freedom in Gaelic] and, champion little jockey that she was, raced to midwife Mrs. O’Flaherty’s house. Liam had been giving riding lessons to his younger sisters since they were wee little girls and, like her brother, Bríd was a natural. She loved racing her own pony, sometimes beating Liam and Bridgee, taking dangerous chances as they’d jump the many stone walls in the hilly landscape.

They all knew it was to the doctor’s house Bríd should be going, but she would be turned away; the doctor was only for English patients and the very privileged Irish class — those who turned their backs on their own — bailiffs, rent collectors, and other such weaklings.

Mrs. O’Flaherty did her best to attend to Colum. Although her specialty was delivering babies, as the last resort for poor Irish farmers and their families, she had experienced all sorts of medical situations. The Irish took care of their own because they had to.

With hard-earned skill, Mrs. O’Flaherty tended to Colum’s serious wounds and, in her usual droll way, finally gave the family the news they were praying for. “He’s got a grand ould bang on his head, but he just won’t shut up. He’s the same cheeky ol’ devil he always was, so he’ll be all right. His left leg is broken, so I put a strong splint on it. He’ll have to take it real easy for a couple o’ weeks.”

“Thanks be to God and his blessed Mother,” Josie cried.

Liam, unable to imagine life without his younger brother, went in to see him. “Irish twins” they were, as Colum was born less than a year after Liam. Inseparable from the start, learning the tough life of farming from their father, and always into every mischief imaginable, that was Colum and Liam. He approached the bed where Colum lay keeping warm under the woolen blankets.

“You’re all right then?”

“Yea, all I remember is a huge wave lifting me up in the air. Where in God’s name did that come from? Mrs. O’Flaherty said you saved my life — you and Bridgee.”

“I suppose you won’t be going to the wake on Thursday then, will ya?”

“I donno’. I won’t be doin’ any dancin’, that’s for sure,” Colum answered with a bright smile. And for the first time that day they laughed.

The wake on Thursday night was a farewell party for Paudie and Úna Casey, [OOnah] who were immigrating to America the following Monday. Their parents had saved enough money for their passage from Queenstown in County Cork, later known as Cobh [Cove]. In the 1800s, Ireland was no country for young people. Anyone lucky enough to get out, got out, but they were the very fortunate few.

As they would likely never return again, this party was known as a “living wake” or “an American wake.” So, their broken-hearted family would put on a brave face for this final night together in Galway, before the emigrants set off on the long journey to the dockage in Cork.

“Don’t forget yer tin whistle,” said Tomás. Over the years he had taught his sons to play the tin whistle and the button accordion, so Liam and Colum were infused with traditional Irish music from all the parties and céilís [KAYlees] everyone enjoyed. Nothing relieved the monotony of the back-breaking and repetitive farming, the constant rain, the daily challenges of surviving the Ireland of the west, and of course, the ever-present brutal British oppression, like a lively céili.

“This is our gold — our music and our dancing,” Tomás always said. “Whatever else the English take, they can’t take this away from us.”

“All right so, you go on, I’ll see ya there,” said Liam.

The Casey’s thatched cottage was larger than the O’Donoghues’. It had a loft where three daughters and two sons slept. The outside was whitewashed with a rough coat of waterproof paint. It had the classic half door, the bottom usually latched to prevent chickens and other small animals from entering. The upper half was open to allow in light and fresh air, and to let out smoke from the turf fire. The cottage windows were tiny — not because the Irish liked tiny windows, rather, because the English, in their greed for every penny possible, levied a tax on windows by size. As always, the Irish did what they had to do — often eliminating windows altogether to avoid yet another tax.

Paudie and Úna Casey shyly greeted neighbors and friends as they streamed into the Caseys’ tiny dwelling. Comprised of one room and the loft, its steep loft ladder had been removed to make more room for the adults gathered there. The children took in the festivities from their perch above.

Paudie and Siobhán Casey [shoveAWN, Joan] warmly welcomed Liam into their home. Stepping inside, he heard the chatter of family and friends sharing thoughts of the young couple leaving. Truly a sad time for the Caseys and for Úna’s parents the Keanes, this was a stark reminder to everyone else attending that they too, could experience the loss of one of their own.

Paudie Casey senior offered the men a little poitín — the illegal brew he’d bought from a master brewer friend who distilled it in the hills of Connemara. The potent drink immediately hit the men who showed their appreciation of its quality with smiles all around.

As they couldn't afford to buy expensive legal whiskey, the Irish brewed their own moonshine from potatoes and barley. The best poitin, 160% proof, 80% alcohol, was brewed in the hills of Ireland. The higher elevation allowed them to see the British soldiers, alerted by the telltale blue smoke of the still, coming to arrest them. Brewers could quickly cease operations, and vanish into the hills and valleys.

Liam saw Colum sitting alone on a small bench on the far wall. Colum was the more outgoing of the two, and Liam felt sorry for him as he had to sit out one of his favorite things to do — dance. When Liam joined him on the bench, their father pulled out his button accordion signaling the start of trying to let go of everyone's sadness. After a couple of notes to warm up, Tomás broke into a lively reel. Feet started to tap as an older man took out his spoons and added a terrific beat. Paudie Casey tuned up his fiddle and played along.

Two couples joined hands and walked onto the dance floor. Others joined in until two lines of eight were formed. That's all it took to get things started, and the fun began! Colum tapped his good leg furiously and took out his spoons to add to the frantic dance beat. They watched as dancers twirled by, one by one, laughing and whooping. Soon everyone was on the dance floor doing a Galway set — an elaborate mini symphony of several three-minute dances called "sets."

Liam, shy as always, and realizing that Colum couldn't enjoy one of his favorite things, held back. Although they were as different as any two brothers could be, Liam the shy one and Colum, the white tornado with no fear of anyone or anything, they were best friends.

Through a break in the crowd, Liam caught a glimpse of a beautiful young girl, thoroughly enjoying the festivities. Her auburn hair flew as she was whipped around the dance floor. As she came closer, her green eyes caught his. Her flawless skin was flushed and glowed from all the dancing. And her smile lit up the room. *What a beautiful girl!*

Mesmerized by her delicate ankles peeking out from under her soft burgundy dress, Liam saw the way her slender body moved to the music with confident grace. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Who in God's name is that?" he asked Colum.

"That's Máire Donnelly." [MOYra, Irish for Mary]

"You're jokin' me."

"Yea, I'm as shocked as you boy. What a change huh? She's been workin' up in Dublin in some fancy house for a few years. I picked a great time to break me leg, didn't I?"

Liam looked again, as she swung with abandon to the frantic beat of the music. He remembered her now: that tall, skinny, freckle-faced tomboy of a girl, with a wild mop of dark red hair. In those gloriously innocent days, she was always wrestling with the boys and getting into as much mischief as any of the lads. He smiled when he remembered the black eye she'd given him when he'd teased her for falling off her pony when they'd raced each other. She'd dusted herself off, gotten back up on her pony, casually ridden up to him, and taking a swing, hit him in the eye. "As if you've never fallen off yerself, Liam O'Donoghue!" And off she galloped.

Máire walked back to her parents when the dance ended. Marveling, Liam couldn't believe how, in such a few short years, she had transformed from that playful little girl into the most beautiful woman he was ever lucky enough to encounter. He wanted nothing more than to sample those lovely lips of hers. In all his twenty-one years, he'd never entertained such thoughts as these about any other girl. While Colum was the womanizer in his family, and Liam had walked out with a few girls himself, none of them had had the immediate warming effect that Máire Donnelly had on him.

When the dance ended, Father Murphy stepped forward to gather everyone and get their attention. It took several moments for the group to take leave of their conversations and turn toward the priest. Father Murphy called the young couple to the front of the room to give the emigrating couple his blessing.

"Ah, 'tis grand to be with you all this evening as we bid farewell to Paudie and Úna before they begin their long journey to America on Monday. 'Tis a sad time to be sure, but we ask God's merciful blessings on them as they start a new life for themselves in the new world. Paudie Junior and Úna, may God keep you close in

his heart, bless you with many children, and look out for you always.”

Father Murphy’s blessing deeply touched these hardened men and women, strong and tough, because they had to be. Yet they couldn’t help themselves now; they sniffed loudly, and their usually stoic faces jerked with anguished emotion. Tears began.

Young Paudie and Úna, their shaking hands gripped tightly with feelings of loss, clung to each other for comfort. They looked at their broken-hearted parents, shoulders slumped and devastated, yet hopeful for their children’s future in the new world.

Addressing the young couple again, Father Murphy continued, “You come from strong Catholic families who will pray for you every day of their lives. May the Lord bless you, Paudie and Úna, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

“Amen,” they all whispered emotionally, their struggling voices nearly silenced by the lumps in their throats.

In the awkward silence that followed the blessing, only Tomás had words. “Horse, play somethin’ for them.”

Liam shyly took out his tin whistle and glanced around the room, taking in the young couple one last time. And then, reflecting the sadness of the occasion, he began to play a slow and haunting air he had recently composed.

On many of his rides atop Bridgee, he’d witnessed the most beautiful ocean sunsets with skies of orange, red, and all shades of purple, the sun brightening the closer it got to the horizon. As the sun kissed the water, he could almost hear it sizzle. All around him, wildflowers draping the hills of Galway, bloomed gloriously. Watching wild hares and pheasants busily building homes for their young, Liam was enchanted by the emotion he felt for God’s beautiful creations, a feeling which flowed from his lips to the tin whistle, and into his song, as it did now for this gathering. Tears flowed freely from everyone present, knowing that they would never see this couple again.

Liam played on, eyes closed, concentrating on the melody with all its subtle inflections and grace notes. He played as a master tin whistle player, steeped in the West Clare/Galway tradition.

Had he opened his eyes, he would have seen Máire staring at him, weeping and remembering her long-ago crush on him, then a strapping, pimply teenager. Now, as she looked at him, she couldn’t

believe the man she saw: white shirt, sleeves rolled up revealing his strong arms, and tweed waistcoat — standing six feet two, skin glowing from his long days working in the fields, and playing the tin whistle with quick strong hands and agile fingers.

Liam was known as “black Irish” — a person born with thick black hair, darker than normal skin, and piercing green eyes. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a thriving wine industry had grown up in the city of Galway. Spanish ships would dock in the city for weeks loading and unloading their goods. Since the sailors did what sailors do, numerous Galway kids grew up looking a lot more Spanish than Irish. As this marvelous infusion of foreign blood coursed through the veins of many an Irish person living on the west coast, the name “black Irish” came to be.

Liam finished his tune and everybody applauded. Then Tomás and the others started to play another lively set, and the dancers took to the floor once more.

Watching Liam pocket his tin whistle, Máire remembered how shy he had been as a boy, so she knew that a first gesture at renewing their friendship would have to be hers.

Having spent a few years in Dublin working as a housemaid for a wealthy English family, she had seen considerably more of the outside world than had the sheltered folks back home in West Galway. Now she wasn’t as shy as she used to be. Wondering how Liam had come on over the years she’d been away, Máire worked her way toward him, wending her way through the clusters of people engaged in conversation.

As she approached, Liam locked eyes with her and then shyly looked toward his brother, assuming that she was coming to talk to Colum, who usually got the looks from the girls.

He heard her voice above the din in the room, “You’re a fine tin whistle player, Liam O’Donoghue, and are ya as fine a dancer?”

Startled and trying to find his tongue, he blurted, “Well I donno’.”

Máire took a step closer and said, “Well come on then.”

Having enjoyed big sips of their drinks, the musicians started playing again, and Máire, smiling her perfect smile, extended her hand to Liam. He grinned, slowly pulled himself to his feet, and took her hand. They reached the dance floor, joined hands formally, and faced the opposite couple.