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The legends of Wild Bill Watkins

Local druid completes trilogy with The Once and Future Celt

BY JEREMY STRATTON

Sitting recently at the breakfast counter at Maria's Café on Franklin Avenue, I noticed the man next to me glancing at the book I was reading: Bill Watkins' *Scotland Is Not for the Squeamish*.

"Do you know him?" the man asked.

"Yeah, I've met him a couple of times. Have you read his books?"

"No," he answered. "But he tried to sell me a kilt once. I told him I was Armenian, not Scottish."

"He could probably find a connection," I told the man, thinking back to something Watkins said upon our first meeting four years ago.

"The Celtic umbrella is enormous; everyone is welcome under it," said Watkins, who introduced himself as "Wild" Bill. "Except for the English; they have to hold it," he continued, producing his trademark smile after the punchline. One need only meet the man once to tell this is classic Watkins; behind the goodhearted joke is a lesson in history and the pride of Celtic culture that the 58-year-old Cooper resident has made it his life's work to carry on.

At the age of 16, Watkins was given this charge by his father: If his generation didn't do something to revive the Celtic culture, it would be dead within Watkins' lifetime.



Dressed to kill — Bill Watkins in full kilt with the now-ornamental 'William Wallace' broadsword at Merlins Rest.

Photo by Jeremy Stratton

More than 40 years later, Watkins is a living symbol of its survival. Watkins' business card, for his company Ketlcom, describes a few of the hats he wears in the service of his mission: Pub design. Heraldic arts. Author. Singer. Poet. Historian. Kiltmaker. Freelance druid. He has consulted on the design and décor of a hand-

ful of pubs, most recently Merlins Rest, which celebrated its one-year anniversary at 3601 E. Lake St. in April. A celebration for the release of *The Once and Future Celt* takes place at Merlins Rest on May 30.

With his Irish and Welsh parents, upbringing in England, coming-

of-age in Scotland and longtime residency in the U.S., Watkins is uniquely qualified to authenticate the "British Isles pub," agreed Lee Tomlin, Merlins' owner. Watkins put his knowledge of pubs more simply: "I've spent most of my life in them."

You'll find Watkins holding court at Merlins Rest a couple nights a week. (He'll be wearing a kilt on Fridays.) Watkins lives just two blocks from the pub with his wife, Katie Bilbauer.

Tomlin called Watkins a "cultural ambassador. The great thing with sitting down and spending an evening with Bill is that he'll start to tell stories that happened in his life," said Tomlin, citing Watkins' incredible memory. "You only have to tell him something once, and he remembers it."

The Celtic trilogy

This "steel trap" memory is evident throughout Watkins' now-completed trilogy of memoirs, which begin with Watkins' first memory — his own birth, he claims — and covers his childhood and coming of age, through his 21st year. Through all three books, Watkins' excellent prose conveys his remarkable memory and creativity, with colorful characters and dialogue, well-timed wit and poetic passages describing the landscapes, flora and fauna of his life, and adventures, from his childhood in Ireland and England to his travels (and intermittent employment) as a young man in Scotland.

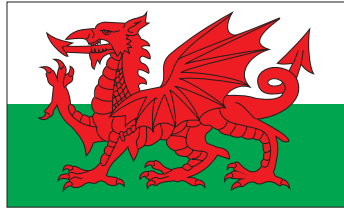
Entertaining and laugh-out-loud funny, the trilogy's charm supports a didactic strain that delivers a deeper, serious message through alternative histories, morality tales, etymologies and linguistic explorations.

The first book, *A Celtic Childhood*, reads like the wondrous mythology that is childhood. Its full stage of characters is stolen by Watkins' parents — his Irish Catholic mother who knows a song or poem for every topic and could "swear for half an hour and never repeat herself;" and his Welsh father, a deep-thinking atheist with a passion for Celtic history, mysticism and the pub.

Watkins' second book, *Scotland Is Not for the Squeamish*, follows the postadolescent Watkins on sea and land through Scotland in the late '60s. With its eclectic bunch of flat-mates and travel companions, the book is like a poor-man's travel guide (if Frommers wrote a *Scotland on Two Pounds a Week*), with a touch of *On the Road*, but instead of gazing at his navel, Watkins focuses his lens on contemporary and historical Scotland and, of course, the Celtic foundation beneath it.

The new book, *The Once and Future Celt*, falls into three distinct parts. The opening section reads like an idyllic dream, with a touch of *Alice in Wonderland*, as an injured Watkins is nursed back to health by a beautiful young Gypsy woman and is accepted into the nomadic community's world for a time. Watkins writes with reverence of the Gypsy culture, comparing it to the Celts'. Their

magical world, timeless and attuned to nature, is like a lost Eden and in stark contrast with the industrial Birmingham to which Watkins reluctantly returns in the book's second section.



The flag of Wales—homeland of Watkins' father—adorns the window at Merlins Rest.

Like many a young man, Watkins spends a fair amount of time seeking that most-ancient of grails — a bonny lass — but the book's backbone is Watkins' spiritual journey with his father to the Wales of his paternal forebears, and long conversations saturated with the history and mysticism that was key to his father's character. The book ends — after five years of contemplating his father's charge — with a clear explanation from another mentor of what it means to be a druid, Watkins' self-declared occupation in life. "Just live your life to the full, and when the time is right, tell your story and most importantly, tell it like a Celt," says Uncle Walter.

The teller and the tale

Frank Delaney, novelist and the author of the BBC series *The Celts*, reviewed the book as "a sly rebellion." Speaking between sips of a late-afternoon Guinness at Merlins Rest, Watkins similarly called it "a subversion.

"If you just start telling people about your culture, you'll bore the pants off people really quickly," he said. "But if you wrap it all up in a story, once they're interested in reading about other folks' lives, they'll lap it up."

It's the age-old way of the bard or "shanachie," and also a function of the "visually-minded" Celts, he explained. This poetic, even pictographical language, is as evident in Watkins' voice in person as in print (though, like the pub itself, the tone and tempo may change as the night wears on.) Watkins' stories — whether told over a pint and the din of the pub or in a book — do more than recount stale legends. Poets, druids, warriors, kings and historical figures become humanized with a quality of telling that he credits to his father. "[He] would talk about things that happened in the Middle Ages as if they happened yesterday," Watkins said.

By the same right, contemporary characters — family members, travel companions, Watkins himself — take their place in that particular pantheon, their actions and stories woven into the Celtic fabric. Watkins relays hilarious stories, like the time he was accidentally alone with the Queen, who exclaimed "There's a terrible smell in here!"; or the time he drank gin while sitting on the bed of her more gracious mother, the Queen Mum. (Talk about subversive!)

At the same time, Watkins is a well of information — useless, he would joke — about Celtic culture and much more. The "com" in Keltcom stands for "communica-

tions," he pointed out. It's a broad term for all that he does: writing (he has won awards for poetry and has written magazine articles); speaking at engagements like Robert Burns suppers and St. Patrick's Day dinners; performing the songs that he venerates, lest they be forgotten, the lyrics of which pepper his books. It even covers his former trade as a wireless radio operator at sea, and it's evident in the nonverbal imagery that covers the walls at Merlins Rest.

Asked where he sees evidence of the Celtic culture's survival, pointed to the nightly communion at the pub. "It's sometimes nice for me, at some point during the night, when I can stop to look around and see everybody smiling. That's because of the ambience, the fellowship that people feel," he said. "That fellowship is very, very ancient; it goes right back to the people that sat around the first campfire."

After a decade or more of writing the trilogy, Watkins isn't immediately eager to get back to writing, but there is at least one other story in him: a book about "The Fiasco Society," of which he is a member. "You can become a member when you've made a complete, cataclysmic balls-up of your professional life," said Watkins. "I've been fired more times than a civil war cannon."

It seems the man who insists he's "basically unemployable" has made a life's work of telling the tale. ■