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A Tale of Ireland Forever, or at Least 1,100 Years

By MEL GUSSOW

Edward Rutherfurd's new novel, "The Princes of Ireland: The Dublin Saga," is 776 pages long, with hundreds of characters; it spans 1,100 years of Irish history, complete with maps and a family tree. Readers who have reveled in Mr. Rutherfurd's previous historical novels have again been undeterred by the weight or the detail. With almost 200,000 copies in print, the book is rising on best-seller lists throughout the United States, and it is No. 4 in Dublin.

The novel, Mr. Rutherfurd's fifth, is a sweeping, carefully reconstructed portrait of a nation from birth to midlife crisis in 1538. Kings and conquerors share the stage with fishermen and farmers. Part 2, carrying the story through the 20th century, is promised for next year.

Capitalizing on the book's popular appeal, the publisher, Doubleday, and the Irish Tourist Board have used it as a tie-in for a win-a-trip-to-Ireland contest. That is not to suggest that the book offers an entirely flattering picture of Ireland. Rather it moves far back into history to talk about blood feuds, slavery and human sacrifice.

As Maeve Binchy said in a review in Ireland: "It is a giant, sprawling, easy-to-read story told in the James Michener fashion, about Dublin. When I used to teach history years ago in a girls school, I would have loved a book like this, something that would have transported the pupils back to the days of gods and goddesses, high kings and druids without any pain."

Mr. Rutherfurd, who is 56, acknowledges Michener as the inventor of the form, a kind of docu-genre. "It's an odd sort of hybrid," he said during a recent visit to New York from his home in Dublin, "a curious region between fiction and nonfiction." Major events and historical characters are real; other characters are imaginary.

Mr. Rutherfurd is scrupulous about accuracy and about avoiding anachronisms. His books are heavily researched and, chapter by chapter, he says, he checks his facts with historians, although by now he could have some claim to that role.

He is candid about his craft: "I think I'm a popularizer of history, a commercial novelist, and I don't think anything is wrong with that." But, he said, he feels an "ethical responsibility not to mislead" the reader.

"I won't cheat on history," he said.

As a result his books are sometimes used as texts in high school classes. His first, "Sarum" (1987), was a 10,000-year history of Salisbury in Wiltshire County in England, where he was born. Each of the other novels has been connected with his life, including "Russka," two milleniums of Russian history. One of his grandfathers lived in Czarist Russia, and Russian remained a family language among his older relatives.

His current book was inspired by his love for his adopted land, Ireland. After visiting the country he decided to stay and has lived in Dublin for 11 years. Married at one time — a subject he prefers not to discuss — he has two children, who now live in the United States.

Born Edward Francis Wintle (Francis to his friends), he adopted a pseudonym because people often got his last name wrong. Rutherford is a family name.

After studying at Cambridge and Stanford Universities, he worked in publishing while writing several novels and 10 plays that were never published or produced. The turning point was his return to Salisbury and his exploration of local history. The result, "Sarum," became a best seller, largely with the help of independent booksellers, and it set the pattern for his subsequent work, including "London," a well-reviewed best seller from 1997.

Explaining his process, he said: "You literally walk the place, and your imagination starts becoming active with your own internal myths and sensations. Sometimes they might turn out to be strangely prescient. Other times they are wildly inaccurate."

Before he begins a novel he will outline the entire book and also prepare a 40-page synopsis for his publisher. "The archetectonics have to be there," he said. "I have to have some sense of the reverberations, and some of the symbols that will be embedded in the text," with this book, occasional poems by W. B. Yeats. But he also leaves a certain amount to chance.

To describe his approach, he reached for a theatrical image. "At the start of each chapter," he said, "I imagine that I'm in a theater, and it's the interval. The curtain has just come down and the audience is about to go into the bar." He moves to a lectern onstage and starts reading the first page. It must be fascinating enough to command the audience's attention.

As "The Princes of Ireland" leaps through centuries, there are recurrent themes and also obligatory events: the arrival of St. Patrick, the creation of the Book of Kells, the Battle of Clontarf (in 1014), which he characterized as "the most important in Celtic Irish history." He said that if the victorious Irish leader, Brian Boru, had not been killed in that battle, Boru might have united all of Ireland and changed the course of the country.

Asked what surprises he had in the writing of "The Princes of Ireland," he said he learned that St. Patrick did not, as popular legend has it, rid Ireland of snakes. After the Ice Age, he said, snakes never reached Ireland, and, he added, neither did mistletoe.

He was also surprised by the preponderance of slavery: "When the Vikings founded Dublin, they ran probably the biggest slave market in Europe," and many of those slaves were English. Readers will also learn that divorce was common in early Ireland, as was the notion of trial marriages. "Puritanical Irish society is really a 19th-century phenomenon," Mr. Rutherford said.

The country, known later for emigration, was actually an island of immigrants, beginning with the Vikings. That, he said, "raises the question of what it means to be Irish." In the novel he also traces the evolution of language and place names, as Dubl Linn became Dyflin and, finally, Dublin.

For all his emphasis on research, he retains a certain skepticism about history. He recalled an incident from his school days. Two teachers suddenly began fighting in a classroom as 22 boys looked on "in absolute horror." Then the fighting stopped and one of the teachers asked the class to write down what had happened.

"There were 22 conflicting stories," he said. "The moral is, historical truth doesn't exist." Facing historical uncertainty, he will have two fictional characters disagree about events and offer alternative views. Through his fiction Mr. Rutherford can arrive at an imaginative approximation of the truth.