

Press Release



Easter Rising

by Michael Patrick MacDonald

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Michael Patrick MacDonald](#)
- [Advance Praise for *Easter Rising*](#)
- [Praise for *All Souls*](#)
- [Easter Rising Play List](#)
- [2006 Tour for Michael Patrick MacDonald](#)

"MacDonald courageously continues to break Southie's silence in this tale of a journey that is as inspiring as it is haunting." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"MacDonald's gift is that he guides us with vision, insight, humor, and the clear, chiseled word. His is a rare sleight of hand." — Colum McCann, author of *This Side of Brightness* and *Dancer*

About the Book

In his best-selling *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*, Michael Patrick MacDonald told the powerful story of a decimated community and family, chronicling the loss of four siblings to the violence, poverty, and gangsterism of Boston's Irish American ghetto. In *Easter Rising: An Irish American Coming Up from Under*, his long-awaited new memoir, MacDonald tells his own story of escaping from that world, immersing himself in the 1980s punk music scene, and traveling to Ireland twice, roots journeys that inspired him to reclaim his heritage as a source of pride rather than shame.

Easter Rising begins with young Michael's first forays outside the soul-crushing walls of Southie's Old Colony housing project. In downtown Boston he discovers the club scene swirling around local bands like Mission of Burma and visiting Brits like the Clash, the Slits, and Johnny Rotten. He eventually winds up in New York's East Village at the height of that neighborhood's *annus mirabilis*, with bands such as the Bad Brains and the Beastie Boys. The clubs offer refuge from the ever-present reminders of where Michael comes from and who he really is. While adults like his grandfather view his participation in the club scene as risky (the "cult of the punk rocks," as the elder MacDonald refers to it), it is, in fact, a creative and critical way for Michael to survive. For him punk music is dark, liberating, and lifesaving.

The death of his brother Frankie, the third of four siblings to fall victim to Southie's culture of violence, eventually draws MacDonald home again, where, in isolation from family and friends, he suffers a breakdown. He describes heartbreaking scenes of hypochondria, posttraumatic numbing, and — unheard-of for a boy from Southie — psychotherapy. In a harrowing attempt at self-discovery, Michael meets his estranged father for the first time, as a corpse laid out at a wake. But his hope of finding something familiar there, and of connecting with a part of himself beyond Old Colony, fails.

Real change finally comes when MacDonald travels to Ireland. His two trips there — the first as an alienated young man who has learned to hate shamrocks and leprechauns with a passion, the second with his extraordinary Ma — are journeys unlike any other in Irish American literature. Michael realizes how the ghosts of Irish history, a history riddled with class conflict, oppression, and shame, have haunted Southie and his family to the present day. MacDonald's travels transform how he sees his world — "It was Ireland that would make everything look different from now on" — as well as how he sees Ma and her foot-stomping accordion reels. Amid the beauty and sorrow of Ireland's landscape, she and her unconventional ways of survival and healing begin to make sense to him.

Easter Rising is the memorable story of Michael Patrick MacDonald's personal path to reconciling himself with where he came from, "a journey that is as inspiring as it is haunting" (*Publishers Weekly*). It is also a funny, honest, heartrending story of both loving and hating the place you call home, a story that will resonate with readers of all backgrounds.

About the Author

Michael Patrick MacDonald is the author of the best-selling *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. He is currently writing the screenplay for *All Souls* under an option agreement with Crossroads Entertainment. Ron Shelton is scheduled to direct the movie. MacDonald lives in Brooklyn, New York.

A Conversation with Michael Patrick MacDonald

What is your second memoir, *Easter Rising*, about?

This book is about rebellion, transformation, and, ultimately, transcendence from the wreckage of childhood poverty and trauma in South Boston's Old Colony Housing project.

As a thirteen-year-old I discovered the very individualist punk rebellion, which saved my life, as it allowed me to step outside the neighborhood and question the chaos, racism, and gangster culture I'd been surrounded by. For a while, rebellion meant rejecting everything I'd come from, including the Irish identity that was so prevalent in South Boston. But when my siblings died in Southie street crime, my punk obsessions with individualism and autonomy only intensified the pain of loss. The alienation of that posttrauma period might have been deadly had I not found a way to reconnect to the world. My reconciliation with all that I come from began with the inadvertent discovery (at age nineteen) of Ireland, the last place I had wanted to see "after a lifetime of plastic shamrocks," as I say in the book. In spite of myself, I found in the rebellious history of

the Irish a way to begin to make sense of everything I'd experienced in my Irish American neighborhood and family. We can transcend where we come from, but only if we first understand where we come from.

Why the title *Easter Rising*?

At the end of the book Ireland's Easter Rising of 1916, perhaps the most spiritual of rebellions, founded in the universal ideas of death and rebirth, is very much with me. My awareness of it took hold when I traveled to Ireland with my mother during Easter Week of 1998, when the Good Friday peace accords were being signed after years of bloodshed — I and saw my mother within that landscape. Throughout my whole coming-of-age search for understanding and reconnection, I'd certainly been getting "closer to home." And learning about Ireland's rebellion against colonization was part of my preoccupation with Irish culture, politics, and history. But, as with most young people, there was still a gulf between my mother and me. I didn't "get" her. It was during that trip to Ireland with her, to the land of "her people," that I began to understand not only her ways, but a very powerful and very Irish way of healing through the gifts of painful and rebellious story and song. Witnessing her foot-stomping Irish rebel songs on the accordion and her ability to use her own horrifically painful experiences as a gift to uplift others experiencing loss, I came to realize an even deeper "Easter Rising" and to find the best way forward in the aftermath of my family's tragedies.

Why did you set out to write this book?

I wrote it in response to numerous conversations I took part in after writing *All Souls*, about my own resiliency and about trauma and recovery in general.

I could never relate to the usual formulas given for youth resiliency and survival. Education and mentors are crucial ways out of difficulty, and we need to continue to make those things accessible and meaningful to all kids, regardless of class. But every time I thought of my own escape from the poverty and violence of my childhood I couldn't help but focus on the more transgressive escapes, the survivalist efforts kids are engaged in every day in our society. From the beginning to the end of this book I maintain my belief in the punk rock maxim "It is right to rebel." In this book, though, the meaning of that statement is transformed along with the stages of my own personal development, my own deaths and rebirths of self. And that is how I survived, how I continue to survive. I've never trusted "mainstream" thought, whether the mainstream was the racist, closed-borders mentality of Southie, the acceptance of a gangster code of silence, or most Americans' support of George Bush in the aftermath of September 11 and their trust in the government's ability to make them safe. The same questioning that helped me navigate the chaotic and violent world of Old Colony is what helps me navigate an increasingly chaotic and violent world in general.

Through storytelling you seem to relate the individual's survival and recovery with the broader survival and recovery of groups of people, such as the Irish. Why?

I'm interested in the idea that the individual's trauma, pain, and recovery parallel the experiences of whole groups of people: neighborhoods traumatized by poverty and violence, nations that suffer under brutal colonization, civil war, or slavery. Whether we're talking about an individual or a group, the effects of oppression and trauma are the same. And thinking about the history of Ireland, Britain's first colony, I couldn't help but be amazed at how the collective pain that recruited thousands of young people to the IRA through the years is the same pain that has resulted in the presence these days of Irish aid workers in countries all over the world plagued by famine and neglect, just as theirs once was. Similarly, the pain that results in such high addiction rates among Irish and Irish American people may also create the high percentages of nurses, activists, artists, and writers among Irish people everywhere. And that can be said for all ethnic groups that have experienced atrocities on a mass scale.

For years, when I worked with families in Boston that had lost a child to street violence, I saw so many parents and siblings of murder victims confronted with the choice of responding to their pain by either more numbing (through drugs and alcohol), more violence, and more pain, or by finding ways to transform painful tragedy by giving back, working to prevent more violent death or building community in some small way. And in a world currently so battered by oppression, corruption, war, and violence, I can't see any way forward other than through this type of revolution of the spirit, on a global scale.

What does history mean to you?

When I went to college after dropping out of high school, I was blown away by the idea that you could choose your subjects according to your interests. Since I've never been very moved by the prospect of making money, I took only courses I was interested in. And after that first trip to Ireland at nineteen, and my discovery that Irish history, even in the postmodern world, had an impact on my own life, all of the courses I took were in history. I studied the history of Ireland and then branched out to study the history of colonization, of India, of Africa, and so on. The parallels, the commonality of experience among these peoples, gripped me, especially after witnessing so much Irish American distancing from "those people," a distancing that I believe was encouraged in this country by those in power. I mean, God forbid that Irish and black people in America should ever find out they have anything in common or that working-class black and white Bostonians learn how much they have in common.

History helps me understand everything we are currently experiencing today. Sad to say, it's the same old story, over and over again. What's happening today in Iraq has parallels in the colonial history of previous centuries. And when I hear of people here in the United States who are not bothered by government wiretapping or the chipping away of civil liberties, I only wish that our schools taught real history, so that we might not have to repeat some of the most dire moments of the past.

Why write memoir?

For me the art of memoir is really about giving a people's history from the grass roots, each of us telling our story as we see it. An African proverb says, Until lions start writing down their own stories, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter. Everyday people, communities, and popular movements have made us who we are as a people. I want to encourage everyone to tell his or her stories so that we can understand the larger history and the ways forward. The catharsis involved in telling one's own story not only changes the individual storyteller, but I believe it is a way to promote a more just and peaceful world. I'm not at all interested in memoir for the sake of applauding one individual for overcoming some horrific experience. I want to know how we can use individual experiences and perspectives to change the world. To me memoir is an extension of the direct community work I was involved in through my twenties and thirties.

How was the writing of *Easter Rising* different from the experience of writing your first memoir, *All Souls*?

All Souls was a breakthrough for me. The process of writing was life-changing every single day. I would write, throw up, sleep, write some more, run away from it for a week or so, come back and write and cry and throw up some more. And at the end of every single day I felt as if I'd just lived through the best day of my life, because I felt the transformative effect of breaking through. With this book I experienced some of that, but I literally walked throughout the entire writing of this book. With *All Souls* I had told the horrific story of family and community tragedies, so in *Easter Rising* I was able to craft story, to focus on a very particular aspect of my life: first, the escape from the Old Colony project, the uprooting from home and from everything I come from, and necessary youthful individuation, and second, my reconnection, or "re-rooting," coming back home in a way that might not have been possible had I not first broken away. So this book had a more particular thread that I wanted to follow, and in a way it was a lot more difficult because I not only had to find the stories that fit this equation of youth development that I've become obsessed with, I had to shape those stories in ways that propelled the book. What that meant for my daily life was lots and lots of walking, and thinking, and then running home to write down the story that revealed itself to me. A few times I ran to the nearest store that sold pens. I'd say it was a lot more difficult to write *Easter Rising*, but not as painful or so literally cathartic as to make me throw up daily, as I did with *All Souls*. In a way this book was more mentally painful and *All Souls* was more physically painful. Both books are equal to me emotionally, or spiritually, if you will.

What is your relationship with your family like today?

As in any family, there are always problems, arguments. But because of the community organizing I've done around poverty, violence, and the issues that most affected us, as well as the process of writing memoir, I feel more bonded to my family than ever before. And I would say the same about my connectedness in general, to class identity and to the fact that I am from the historically maligned population of South Boston, marginalized as it was by both conservatives and liberals through the years, and to my own family history and heritage and to the similar histories of people everywhere.

These days there's a lot of merging of punk rebellion and Irish heritage. In *Easter Rising* you point out that buried underneath the invented punk names of London punk's class of 1976/77 were Irish names: Johnny Rotten was Johnny Lydon, for example. How do you see the transition from a time when postmodern subculture types eschewed the notion of heritage, to today's barrage of bands combining punk with Irish rebel songs?

After my first trip to Ireland in 1985, I became a devotee of the Pogues, following them on tour all over the Northeast. Shane McGowan had been one of that very first crew of London's punks of 1976. I remembered seeing pictures of him with razor-shorn hair and wearing a blazer made of the British Union Jack. It never occurred to me that he was Irish or that one day he'd start the first band to make a connection between the punk rock rebellion and his heritage of Irish rebellion. It was strange to be in the audience for the Pogues, a bunch of London punks, and to see an instrument as familiar to me as the accordion — my mother's instrument! — played at breakneck speed. For the first time I was able to brag to people, "My mother plays the accordion!"

After the Pogues, a lot of the Irishness among the original punks became more apparent. Elvis Costello produced their album under his real name: Declan McManus. It was only then, after studying Irish history, that I could revisit his earlier albums and realize that the song "Oliver's Army" had been about Oliver Cromwell, who had committed the most atrocities upon the Irish. In Southie the shamrocks and leprechauns had eclipsed any knowledge of Cromwell, so I didn't even know who he was, and as a punk I had abandoned all things connected to my heritage. Even though I had read about Johnny Rotten and knew his parents were from Ireland, I was surprised years later when he came out with an autobiography called *No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, referring to the signs he'd witnessed in the very anti-Irish England of the 1960s and 1970s. In his punk days he never referred in interviews to being Irish in England, or how that might have shaped his own alienation and resistance. I mean, it is interesting that his *very* Irish face became *the* face of the 1970s English working-class youth rebellion.

And today a whole slew of bands are combining Irish rebel songs with punk-rock tempo and attitude. The Dropkick Murphys and Flogging Molly are the best-known bands to have picked up where the Pogues left off. But on MySpace.com you'll come across literally hundreds of such bands all across America, England, and Ireland. In Southie today you'll even hear kids talking about these bands, as well as Shane McGowan. It blows my mind, because back in my day it was dangerous to wear combat boots or simply have intentionally messy hair in Southie.

I think it's all good, as long as the Irish punk bands and their audiences truly understand Irish history and culture, beyond the shamrocks. The greatest danger is always when that empty pride becomes prejudice, or when audiences become entirely Irish American. I'm Irish American, and as a writer there is nothing more affirming to me than having a Puerto Rican kid from the South Bronx tell me, after reading *All Souls*, "You told *my* story." That's the way it ought to be. Other than that type of connection to a greater awareness, I really have no interest in my ethnicity, or even in my class background, or memoir in general.

Given that part of the excitement of "punk" in the late 1970s and early 1980s was in the feeling of being part of a secret underground (perhaps exclusive) culture, what might kids find today in the post-MTV world where punk is just another genre for sale?

In my youth we abhorred the term "punk." It's a word the media invented, and it became the name of a genre of music. In fact the original bands sounded nothing alike. Some were fast, but by today's standards many were slow, or just strange, different from anything else. "Punk rock" was what people yelled at you from passing cars once the term became widely known. Today it is used to describe a very particular formulaic sound being played by poppy boy bands like Sum 31 or Blink 182. But punk, if we have to call it anything, was not a particular sound. The title of a great new documentary, *Punk: Attitude* says it all. It was made by Don Letts, a Jamaican dread who was a dub DJ, and one of the most pivotal people at the heart of the scene around the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Slits. These bands sounded nothing like one another, and the people in them didn't look anything alike. There was no "look" until later. But the youth movement that formed organically on the streets of London and Manhattan was inevitably coopted by the music industry and sold back to kids as Punk with a capital P.

I'm glad I grew up before MTV, which was the beginning of the end of the youth music subculture. You can see it in the difference between what street-based hip hop meant before the takeover of MTV and what Hip Hop means today. But kids are brilliant, and they will always find ways to survive and grow in spite of the adult obsession with selling them stuff. Kids are always forming underground scenes where they can learn peer to peer, whether in political organizing or with poetry slams. I do think it's important for there to be places for outsider kids, the "nerds" of past generations, to express themselves and to develop fresh ideas and new leadership to counter the influence advertisers seem to have on the mainstream culture.

You live in Brooklyn today. How could you move away from Southie, the place you called "the best place in the world" in *All Souls*?

As both books make clear, I was eventually able to appreciate all that I'd experienced growing up in Old Colony and in Southie. In Southie I learned some of the best and worst qualities of a tight-knit neighborhood. I also don't think I would have had the perspectives on race and class that I have today if I had not grown up in Southie. But I also might not have those perspectives if I had not gotten out of Southie for a time. My whole life I've had a foot in each world: the world of Southie and the bigger world. And I appreciate both and want to be able to walk in both worlds always.

When I first returned to Southie and to a sense of "home," after years of hating it as a teen, I thought I would never leave. But eventually part of my own healing experience with that neighborhood was the realization that I can take all of my Southie experiences — the best and worst of them — with me wherever I go. Today, while Southie itself has changed, for better or worse, I feel that in Brooklyn I live in "the best place in the world." I'd say that I picked the qualities of my new neighborhood based on my lifelong Southie experience. The best Southie qualities of loyalty and connectedness to one another exist in my neighborhood now, but I also feel that the race and class diversity of my new neighborhood is what I've always wanted, especially today, when gentrification creates apartheid cities where white equals well-to-do and black and Latino neighborhoods

continue to be plagued by poverty and violence. Southie too is becoming an "apartheid neighborhood," with the projects becoming increasingly black and Latino while the surrounding neighborhood is white and yuppie. I think that type of stratification offers a dangerous equation to kids growing up around it. In a way I was very fortunate to experience and see such intense ghetto poverty among white people. In my Brooklyn neighborhood now there are upper-class and working-class African Americans as well as a broad spectrum of white people: from yuppies to artists to old-school working-class Irish and Italians. But my appreciation of that comes from having grown up in Southie. So it is still, in my memory, the best place in the world.

Advance Praise for *Easter Rising*

"MacDonald's *Easter Rising* recounts his escape from South Boston's public housing projects through the rabbit hole of the early '80s Boston punk scene, and his account of the cultural underground is shot through with nuance, heart, and humor. But let's get real — for true transgressive power, what chance do a bunch of art school punk bands have against his wild-haired, foot-stomping mother when she breaks out her accordion in public? Now THAT is true punk, and MacDonald comes to realize it. A well-wrought tale of personal transformation, *Easter Rising* hits all the right notes." — Clint Conley, *Mission of Burma*

"Joseph Brodsky said that you can't go back to the country that doesn't exist anymore. In *Easter Rising* we go back to a lot of old countries — Southie, Ireland, the countries of mothers, gone fathers, music, joy, even despair — and each time we emerge renewed. MacDonald's gift is that he guides us with vision, insight, humor, and the clear, chiseled word. His is a rare sleight of hand." — Colum McCann, author of *This Side of Brightness* and *Dancer*

"MacDonald continues to courageously break Southie's silence in this tale of a journey that is as inspiring as it is haunting." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Affecting . . . Blistering scrapbook pages from a melancholy childhood." — *Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *All Souls*

"Searing power . . . [MacDonald's] swift, conversational style sweeps you into his anger and sorrow." — *USA Today*

"*All Souls* is the written equivalent of an Irish wake, where revelers dance and sing the dead person's praises. In that same style, the book leavens tragedy with dashes of humor but preserves the heartbreaking details." — *New York Times Book Review*

"[A] guileless and powerful memoir of precarious life and early death in Boston's Irish ghetto." — *Time*

Easter Rising Play List

- Chic, "Good Times"
- Earth, Wind, and Fire, "Boogie Wonderland"
- Sister Sledge, "We Are Family"
- Sex Pistols, "Anarchy"
- Patti Smith, "In Excelsis Deo"
- Buzzcocks, "Boredom"
- Black Flag, "Nervous Breakdown"
- Richard Hell and the Voidoids, "Blank Generation"
- Iggy and the Stooges, "Search and Destroy"
- Rocket from the Tombs, "Sonic Reducer"
- Dead Boys, "Sonic Reducer"
- Mikey Dread, "Break Down de Walls"
- The Clash, "Armagedeon Time," "Police and Thieves," "I'm Not Down"
- Willie Williams, "Armagedeon Time"
- Junior Murvin, "Police and Thieves"
- X-ray Spex, "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!"
- Mission of Burma, "That's How I Escaped My Certain Fate"
- The Slits, "Heard It Through the Grapevine"
- Public Image Limited (pil), "Death Disco"
- Siouxsie and the Banshees, "Pull It to Bits"
- Gang of Four, "Not Great Men," "I Found That Essence Rare"
- Pere Ubu, "Dub Housing"
- Joy Division, "She's Lost Control"
- Bad Brains, "Big Takeover"
- King Tubby, "Dub from the Roots"
- Liquid Liquid, "Cavern"
- Traditional, "Danny Boy"
- Traditional, "Black and Tan Gun"
- William B. Yeats, "Easter 1916"

2006 Tour for Michael Patrick MacDonald

New York City Rocky Sullivan's
September 27, 8:00 p.m.

Barnes and Noble Park Slope
September 28, 7:30 p.m.

Irish Arts Center
September 29, 7:00 p.m.

Mo Pitkin's Reader's Room Series
November 6, 7:00 p.m.

Massachusetts

Great Scott, Allston
September 30

Northeastern University Library Series, Boston
October 3, 12:00 noon

John F. Kennedy Library, Boston
October 3, 5:00 p.m.

Odyssey Bookshop, South Hadley
October 29, 3:00 p.m.

Wellesley Booksmith, Wellesley
October 30, 7:00 p.m.

Borders, Downtown Crossing, Boston
November 1, 12:30 p.m.

Clark University, Worcester
November 2, 6:00 p.m.

Barnes and Noble, Framingham
November 3, 7:00 p.m.

California

A Great Good Place for Books, Oakland
October 5, 7:00 p.m.

Ireland's 32, San Francisco
Sponsored by Green Apple Books
October 6, 7:00 p.m.

Northern California Independent Booksellers Association
Annual Trade Show Moveable Feast
October 7, 7:00 p.m.

Book Soup, Hollywood
October 8, 4:00 p.m.

Vroman's, Pasadena
October 9, 7:00 p.m.

Village Books, Pacific Palisades
October 10, 7:30 p.m.

Seattle

Conor Byrne Pub
Sponsored by University Bookstore
October 11, 7:00 p.m.

Cleveland

Parnell's Pub

with Joseph-Beth Booksellers

October 13, 7:00 p.m

Chicago

Molly Malone's Pub, Forest Park

Sponsored by Barbara's Bookstore

October 15, 3:00 p.m.

DePaul University

October 16, 12:30 p.m.

Borders, Beverly

October 16, 7:30 p.m.

Miami

Miami Book Fair

November 18