

From the Emerald Isle to the South Pacific – the Irish spirit stays strong

David Baigent looks at the probabilities of a few good ceilidhs on the island for St Patrick's day celebrations this weekend.

The day is coming up when the world focuses on all things Irish, and those whose ancestry can sport more than a drop of Gaelic blood begin to rouse themselves to remember St Patrick. The good saint's day falls on a Sunday this year and with a stretch of will and imagination, it provides an excuse for an all-weekend party.

And yet for a lot of us, 'Irishness' is something hard to grapple with. It's a feeling that you get watching television shows or walking into one of the world's myriad of Irish pubs.

Just what is it? More important, what does it mean to us all, Irish and non-Irish?

An estimated 50 to 80 million people are descendants of Irish people. Those claiming partial Irish ancestry are about ten times the population of Ireland.

So if that's not permission for many to celebrate St Pat's day, then what is?

And if you have any doubts about belonging, shout an Irishman a Guinness and you have a ticket to celebrate.

Leading up to the carousing and the craic of 17 March, it seems a good time to look at the state of the Irish spirit on Waiheke.

Anton Forde is an artist and teacher living on the island. He has lived here for five years, the latest in a series of sojourns during a sporting and artistic pilgrimage.

Anton's Irish journey began with what many sporting Kiwis have to offer the old world, rugby skills.

Honed at St Patrick's College in Silverstream, his abilities elevated him to stints representing Wellington and Manawatu.

His Irish pedigree was solid with a grandmother from County Offaly and a grandfather from Galway. Offers of a professional future in the game moved him to travel to Eire in 1995 to play as a young openside flanker.

What he found was two years of hard knocks in Irish rugby.



Left - Anton Forde. Irish light made into art. "The locals soon got to know me. I was invited to the lockup, that place after closing for only the trusted, only the honest.

"Then would come more Guinness, more music and more poetry," he says.

"It all made me feel real. It made my art real."

Right - Irish swirls and Maori koru coming together in the artist's 'The Adze'

"The first club was in a lower division and they made me pay my own hotels and expenses," he says.

"If I lost weight, I lost wages."

Looking to cut costs, he started searching for cheaper digs.

"I got a tip about a place called Castleknock College where they might put up people for free."

He was met by a group of Vincentian priests who looked after a boarding school of boys in Dublin's northwest.

"I told them I was a active sportsman and a teacher and they took me on to manage the boarders."

Accommodation and occupation issues solved, he became an indispensable man around the school.

Stable accommodation helped the rugby career which ended up with his club Leinster playing the Heineken Cup after two years.

A carver since boyhood, Anton soon began to feel a spirit

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