As anticipated, he held the crowd in the palm of his hand with some of his more familiar popular work early on, and in the latter half of the concert he grew more serious as he introduced several songs he had written that were inspired by the Great Irish Famine of 1845-48, a risky thing to do perhaps for other performers but not for O’Rourke this night and in this hallowed hall.

O’Rourke’s set up was that he had discovered that his own grandfather was born in a workhouse in Gort, the kind that got their start in Famine times, and unearthing of a link back to one of the darkest periods in Irish history. It set his mind wandering back for material for new songs and revelations for his generation where not much attention had been paid to it.

As he sang two or three songs from the potential canon of work he project for the future, I looked through the audience on both sides of the church aisle and was impressed with their attention to the newly minted lyrics spun by a master storyteller and troubadour. It was clear that he had found a vein to mine in that special way that a visionary folk singer can.

Balancing the demands of a popular performer in Ireland and Europe and occasional forays to the U.S. and the Irish Arts Center, O’Rourke still kept working at his mission to bring the tales of the Famine years to light for today’s audience so he continued doing extensive reading and research on the period and the historical reflections that derived from it in the works of John O’Connor and Christine Kinealy and others.

Towards the end of 2017 he released a CD, Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine, with 12 original compositions, and had the opportunity to workshop it at the Abbey Theatre and ready it for performances with a hand-picked band. And thanks to one of his most fervent spon- sors, the Irish Arts Center, he is going to have the opportunity to perform it with his band for nine shows on a two-week tour in early February with the assis- tance of Culture Ireland.

Most of the band touring the U.S. have appeared on the CD and performed in over 20 performances in Ireland and the U.K. — including Celtic Connections last year around this time — and the show has gotten a marvelous reception among audiences and critics.

O’Rourke’s aim in his Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine through his songs and creative perspective is to honor the past in our remembrance but also in the celebration of our common humanity in our own time and place. Could there ever be a time that is more relevant than now throughout the world?

The tour begins in Chicago on Febru- ary 12 at the Old Town School of Music; the 3rd in Kansas City, Missouri at the KC Irish Center before a four-day res- idence at the Irish Arts Center in New York City (www.irishartscenter.org) from the 7th to the 10th.

O’Rourke will fit in a public interview and chat with historian Kinealy at 6 p.m. at Ireland’s Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University to talk about the Famine and its impact on Irish culture. On Feb- ruary 14 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania the troop will perform at Felicia’s 80 theater be- fore finishing up with two shows in Elkton and Asheville, North Carolina.

In marking the centennial of the 1916 Rising a couple of years ago in Ireland and all over the world of the Irish dias- pora, we learned many new lessons about who we are as the Irish of home and away. O’Rourke’s aim in his Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine through his songs and creative perspective is to honor the past in our remembrance but also in the celebration of our common humanity in our own time and place. Could there ever be a time that is more relevant than now throughout the world?

Weekend Fiddles and Quill

UP in the Northwest Bronx there is a lovely little café that most closely approximates the cozy confines of an Irish kitch- en house party atmosphere while also paying homage to the rich cultural assets nearby and all around New York City at times.

Whether it is local theater, po- etry or music, this multi-faceted hostelry provides sustenance for artists who prefer smaller, more intimate spaces to share their artistry.

And for the punters who par- take of those crafts, they are well catered for with a fine selection of pub grub and reasonably priced grog in the colorful Riverdale lo- cale known as An Beal Bocht on West 238th Street on a blustery, looking Gaelic Park and steps away from Manhattan College.

Trad music fans in the neighbor- hood currently enjoy regular appearances by the Kerry singer Mary Courtney on a Friday night and Sunday night sessions led by the Wexford Box player John Red- mond and flute player Sean Tier- ney from Yonkers.

There are ad-hoc concerts there occasionally, and many of the musicians like Andy McGann and Kevin Burke have made re- turn engagements there when touring the Big Apple.

There is a new initiative brew- ing called the “NYC Celtic Fiddle Feis” which is hoping to take root at An Beal Bocht with the theme of being a gathering of fiddle players to share tunes periodically.

It is a worthy gambit with no shortage of really fine Celtic fiddle players available to draw from lo- cally who might enjoy a Saturday night of tunes and crossing paths with players who don’t always have such an opportunity to play in such a comfortable format.

The inaugural event takes place Saturday, January 26th from 8-30 to 11-30 p.m., and there is no question that it will get off to a roaring start.

Three of New York’s top fi- dders well known to session den- izens around town, Denny McCa- rthy, Mattie Mancuso and Colum Michael Pasqua, are joining forces with accompanist by Matty Stapleton. For more info, visit www.anbealbocht.com.

Earlier that day, the Kerry- men’s B & B Association is orga- nizing a “Commemoration of the Great Trade Union Leader Mike Quill” from 1-6 p.m. at their hall at 365 McLean avenue in the Bronx, which will have lots of informa- tion about the legendary labor leader from Kilgarvan. Call 914- 964-2100 for more info or visit www.kerrymen.org.