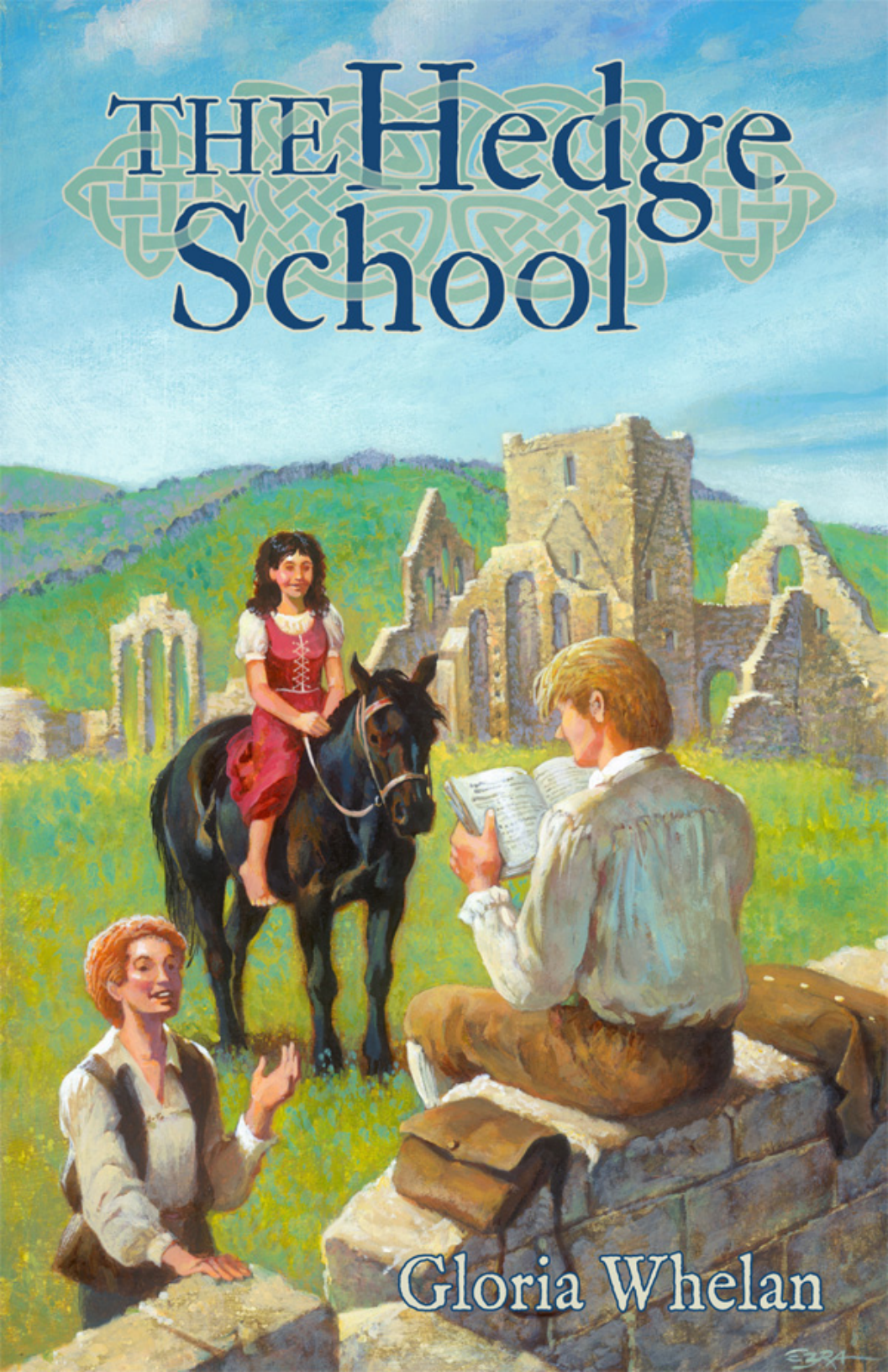
The Hedge School



Gloria Whelan

The Hedge School

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Deviling the English

WE WERE THE oldest students and in our last year at Dermot O'Doyle's hedge school, when we collided into an adventure that would change our lives. There were the three of us, Rose was fourteen and Liam and myself, Padraic, were both fifteen, all of us comrades and ready for any mischief that came our way. Our lives stretched out before us like a bolt of the shiny silk Gilligan kept in his shop for the grand ladies up at the estate.

In this year of 1735 the English ruled Ireland. They had settled into our country like a great, greedy cuckoo stealing onto the nest of a small bird. They forbid schools for us Irish. When a school was found, the parents of the students were punished and the schoolmaster sent to prison. But you cannot keep us Irish from our learning. Even Rory Burke, who made his living traveling about with a spade and digging for anyone who would hire him, could give you a Latin verse or two from Virgil. Way back in the sixth century, when the English could not put one word next

to another to make a sentence, our Irish monks were laboring at copying the sacred scripture in Latin. The English could put their hands over our mouths all they liked, but words kept bursting from our hearts.

Our village of Glasglyn had welcomed Dermot O'Doyle. He took over our hedge school from another schoolmaster, a restless man, too fond of a tavern. O'Doyle had come east to our village from the town of Doolin, a fishing village on the sea. Our school daren't chance holding our classes in a hut where the British could seek us out and punish us, so the dozen or so of us students met in a bit of a hollow beneath a bank. It was no more than a cave hidden by the hedge that served as a border between the fields of the great Finchley estate and the road to Limerick.

On a fair day it was not a bad thing to attend a school out where you could hear the skylark's song high above you and see the wind ruffle the leaves over your head. You might catch a glimpse of a badger poking its snout out of its hole as if it wanted to join in our class, or we boys might devil the girls by scaring up a mouse. Somehow the Latin verbs were easier to learn in the open air, and the words of Shakespeare—the one Englishman our schoolmaster could abide—soared with the skylarks.

School was held in rain and snow as well, with us crouching beneath the bank to keep dry, a peat fire smoldering, the smoke a danger that might give us away, and one of the younger students up on the bank to keep watch for the red coat of an English soldier. Our school opened each day with the reading of

a psalm. On this day it had been the Ninety-fourth Psalm with its cry for vengeance and its asking of how long the wicked would triumph, reminding us all of our English masters. Our schoolmaster, O'Doyle, spoke the words with so great a passion we were all ready to march on the town hall and the English who ruled us there. Then it was reading and arithmetic for the younger students and Latin and Euclid for us older students in our last year of schooling. Even if the English had allowed us books we were too poor to purchase them so all our lessons had to be committed to memory. It was hard work on a summer's day, but O'Doyle had a rare passion for pounding a lesson into our heads and once we had learned it, we carried it with us always.

Little Tadhg was lookout that afternoon and fell asleep when he should have been watching. He came to his senses just in time to warn us, tumbling into our midst in haste and confusion to announce that Mr. Cunningham, the English magistrate, was almost upon us.

Cunningham would have to be drawn away from the hedge school or our parents would be fined, and our headmaster, O'Doyle, put into jail for the teaching of us. With no thought for what I was doing I shot out of our shelter with Liam close behind, and in spite of my hissing at her to stay where she was, Rose ran after us, for Rose was both impetuous and mischievous, a dire combination if ever there was one. We all converged on the startled Cunningham at the same moment. "Sir," I said, gasping for breath, "you being a

magistrate and all, would you take a moment to settle an argument for us?"

"What do you mean, boy? Get out of my way, now." Cunningham was a thick man, thick of leg and waist and mind, a man simple to distract.

The three of us had him surrounded, and I knew as we talked the schoolmaster and the students were stealing safely away into the fields. I grasped for an excuse to keep him there, finally blurting out, "Liam here says there was no real English victory at the Battle of the Boyne because after the battle the Irish chased King William from Ireland back to England." It was a topic to engage Cunningham, for the English victory at the Battle of the Boyne, fought over a hundred years ago, was the pride of all the English.

Mr. Cunningham grew very red. "It's no wonder they don't allow school to be wasted on such fools as you. Even if you could learn to read, which I doubt, you would have no understanding of the words put before you." He started up in the direction of the school.

Rose for once had kept quiet, but now she pulled Cunningham's long coattail to divert his attention. "Your King William couldn't even speak English," she said. "We can speak both Irish and English so your King William must have been more of a fool than we are."

If it had been Liam or me, Cunningham would have had us by the scruff of the neck, but Rose with her cloud of black curls and cornflower blue eyes put him off. "I'll have the names of the lot of you," the magistrate shouted, but we were already flying over the fields,

leaving the man throwing curses like stones after us. Unlike the morning's psalm, this time the wicked had not triumphed. We fled up one hill and over another until out of breath and still choking with laughter, the three of us flung ourselves down on the bank of the small stream that divided into two parts the thousand acres of the Finchley estate. It was summer and even if we could have afforded shoes, we had little need for them, so that in no time our feet dangled in the cold water where tiny fish nibbled at our toes. We were free of school on a summer morning and smug with our cunning. That we had no business on Finchley's land made our being there all the sweeter to me, for the truth of it was, the land was more my family's than his.

"I'd like to have seen his face," Liam said, "had we given him a handful of our Latin." Liam was a tall lad and reedy, as if his growing had gotten out of hand. He looked half-starved, but he ate well for his pa, a blacksmith, had all the horses in town as well as the Finchley horses to shoe. Liam's mother had died when he was a young lad and Liam lived alone with his pa, helping with the work. Liam was the Latin scholar in our school, as good with the words of the Romans as he was with his English, but not a boy to shove his learning in your face. He liked his fun, but there was a kindliness to him that kept him from the cruel teasing and bullying some of the other boys engaged in.

Rose was herself, sharp and sassy, with words pouring out of her mouth and with no thought for the consequences. She was quick at school when she took the time to study, but she would have told you the

best of her life was riding over the paths and up and down the hills on her colt, Crow's Wing. On my worst days, the sight of her cheered me and a day without her was wasted.

I was Padraic, with a thatch of hair as red as the breast of a kingfisher, too quick with my temper, and ready to take on any fight. Rage simmered in me, always ready to boil over. I called the world unfair and was on the lookout to set it to rights. It was nearly 100 years ago that injustice had been done to my ancestors by the English, still I thought of the injustice every day as I walked by Castle Finchley on my way to school. Every day I was angry all over again. I chewed on the anger and choked on any attempts to swallow it.

Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, had come to Ireland to put down the Irish rebellion at that time. The English had long been trying to force Ireland into English ways and religion. He killed the people and killed the priests. "You shall be broken in pieces," he threatened the Irish, "I will give you wormwood to bite on." He took away the property of any Irish landowner who had fought for Ireland's freedom, dividing their land among his own English soldiers and followers. My Fitzbrian ancestors had owned Castle Finchley, and lost it for fighting the English. That injustice was as bitter as wormwood to me, and it was a rare day when I didn't have a new scheme to reclaim our land. As a small boy I would go off into the hills and build myself a castle of stones and sod and sit there as much a lord over my little domain as you please.