

*Happy  
New Year*

EVERYDAY  
**IRISH**  
**PROVERBS**  
AND SAYINGS

**The North Mayo Heritage Centre**  
**REOPENS 6<sup>th</sup> Jan.**

Opening hours for Reception and Shop:  
10am to 4pm (Tue, Wed, Thur)  
10am to 2.30pm (Fri)

Cover image: Mrs. Bridget Monaghan (Biddy Doherty), Rossport, Erris. May 1938. Bridget was a herbalist and had knowledge of many old Irish sayings, proverbs and cures. (*dúchas.ie* G008.03.00007)

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The  
North Mayo  
Heritage  
Centre

# Everyday Irish Proverbs and Sayings

The importance of Irish sayings in everyday life cannot be overstated. Many of these words of wisdom have been handed down through generations by word of mouth through our oral tradition. Some sayings are influenced by poverty, farming, mythology, and historical events. Most have been translated from their original Irish version. We take a look at some of the more popular sayings.

*The longest way around is the shortest way home.*

The phrase was used by James Joyce and suggests that sometimes taking a more direct route to achieve a goal may not be more efficient in the long run.

*Never scald your lips with another man's porridge.*

You shouldn't get involved in another person's affairs. Another interpretation is a warning against having an affair with another man's wife.

*You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.*

This is a way of saying that you can't turn something that is of poor quality into something of high quality.

*Hunger is good sauce.*

One of the more obvious ways to interpret this is that hunger will make anything taste better. Another is that having a want that's driven by physical need makes something all the more enjoyable.

*An old dog for the hard road.*

This alludes to the fact that experience reigns supreme during difficult times, and that an older experienced person is able to tackle tricky or tough situations.

*Building castles in the air.*

This describes someone who daydreams, fantasizes, or creates elaborate and unrealistic plans.

*It's a long road that has no turning.*

This describes how unfortunate times will turn fortunate at some stage.

*A good start is half the battle.*

This emphasizes the importance of beginning a task on the right foot; you will have an easier path ahead.

*You never miss the water until the well runs dry.*

The phrase means that some people only fully appreciate or value something when they no longer have it.

*The older the fiddle the sweeter the tune.*

This proverb is a way of saying that as people grow older, they often become wiser and more learned.

*May the road rise to meet you.*

This comes from an ancient Gaelic proverb which translates as 'may your path be blessed'. It is commonly used as a farewell phrase when people are leaving on a long journey.

*A stitch in time saves nine.*

This is a proverb about efficiency and taking prompt action, advising people to take care of tasks quickly and properly, to avoid a larger problem later on.

*Broken Irish is better than clever English.*

This is not a political phrase but it more simply says that it is better to try and speak one's native language, or the language of the country you're visiting, rather than reverting to English.

*He'd curse the face off a map.*

A way of describing a person who regularly curses while talking.

*You have a tongue that would pick a lock.*

This is said in relation to a person that has the ability to wrangle themselves out of certain situations. Someone who is persuasive and skilled at manipulation.

*Talk is cheap.*

Words alone are not enough – actions need to prove them.

*No matter how long the day the evening always comes.*

No matter how bad things are the problems will eventually end and things will improve.

*As many corners as a bag of turf.*

This is used to describe someone or something that is of irregular shape.

*A new broom sweeps clean, but an old broom knows the corners.*

This emphasizes the importance of experience. While the new 'broom' is shiny and new and does the job, the 'old broom' with its vast experience knows the secrets only learnt with time.

*It is often a person's mouth that breaks his nose.*

This is a way of saying that someone who talks too much, talks nonsense, or interferes in another's business too much, can often lead themselves into a volatile situation.

*Paper does not refuse ink.*

Meaning do not believe everything you read in the paper.

## THE YEAR

by  
Ella Wheeler  
Wilcox

What can be said in  
New Year rhymes,  
That's not been said a  
thousand times?

The new years come,  
the old years go,  
We know we dream,  
we dream we know.

We rise up laughing  
with the light,  
We lie down weeping  
with the night.

We hug the world until  
it stings,  
We curse it then and  
sigh for wings.

We live, we love, we  
woo, we wed,  
We wreath our prides,  
we sheet our dead.

We laugh, we weep, we  
hope, we fear,  
And that's the burden  
of a year.

### Sources

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