'Secret Language' explores slang's Irish roots

By AMY HALLORAN

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Authors Peter Quinn and Daniel Cassidy had a charmed introduction.

"After 'Banished Children of Eve' came out," Quinn says, referring to his first novel, "I was at a book fair in San Francisco, and I heard this voice, it's like a honk, I call it a New York honk, and it was like 'Some Enchanted Evening.' I look across and I meet Dan Cassidy, and we started to talk back and forth. I was with him from the very beginning in his exploration."

The "exploration" he refers to is Cassidy's book "How the Irish Invented Slang: The Secret Language of the Crossroads" (CounterPunch Books; 2007). The pair will appear at the State Museum in Albany at 8 p.m. Monday on a St. Patrick's Day program organized by the New York State Writers Institute.

According to Cassidy, his journey to his book, a dictionary of Irish-American vernacular plus a few essays on the topic, began when he inherited an Irish dictionary. He thought he was too old to learn Irish and was going to pass the book along, but his wife convinced him he should keep it in honor of his friend. Cassidy kept the Focloir Poca on his nightstand and began reading a word a night. This small nightly voyage soon turned into a major expedition into the Irish language, and the mark the famine immigrants made on American language.

He's still touring for the book, and brings a guitar with him to sing the folk song "Paddy Works on the Erie." Traditionally, some of the lyrics were seen as nonsense, but Cassidy traces the words to Irish-American slang.

"(The song is) a sanas -- sanas means secret, but it also means etymology -- it's sanas-laoi (a secret song) of Irish immigrants in America," Cassidy said by phone from San Francisco, where he lives, "a litany of working and rising and rising and working -- of immigrants in America. The real secret song of immigrants to America has been rising and working ... digging ditches, scrubbing floors, cleaning baby's butts."

Cassidy teaches Irish Studies at the New College of California. His book -- which contains essays about the words jazz and dude and gambling -- is built around a lexicon of English and American words paired with their Irish parents. For example, cop is from ceap, the Irish word that as a noun means "protector" and as a verb means "to seize."

Quinn, a former speechwriter for New York Govs. Carey and Cuomo, shares Cassidy's interests in Irish America and wrote the introduction to the book. But Quinn has also followed his own Irish-themed literary pursuits.

"When I was up in Albany, I had this idea to write a social history about the Irish immigration to the Lower East Side during the famine, because that's when my family first came," Quinn said in a phone interview from his home in Hastings, Oswego County. "One key thing was I found that Steven Foster, the songwriter, was down on the Lower East Side in the Civil War. He had become an alcoholic. He was living on the bowery, and it was the first time I began to think, 'What if could I try to get inside his head?' I can't do it as a historian, but I can do it as a novelist."

That research yielded his novel "Banished Children of Eve" (Viking; 1994). He's also published "Hour of the Cat" (Overlook; 2005), a murder-mystery about the Nazi Germany. Quinn's collection of essays, "Looking for Jimmy: A Search for Irish America" (Overlook; 2007), recently released in paperback, in a way is, the social history of the famine immigrants he began years ago.

Amy Halloran is a freelance writer living in Troy.

Daniel Cassidy

and Peter Quinn

What: The Irish-American writers read from and discuss their work on St. Patrick's Day.

Where: Clark Auditorium, Cultural Education Center, State Museum, Madison Avenue, Albany

When: 8 p.m. Monday

Admission: Free

Info: New York State Writers Institute 442-5620; http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/