



Courage: Portrait of the historian Catherine Corless by Paul MacCormaic



by **Shane McGrath**

HANDS crossed in her lap, Annie Murphy looks out at the world through familiar eyes, undimmed by time or turmoil. The features — cast across front pages day after endless day once upon a time — are familiar, a mix of dignity and defiance.

This is the woman who told her story and, in doing so, helped undo decades of institutional lies and evasions.

In the National Gallery of Ireland today, a portrait of Annie Murphy looks down from the walls. It was painted in acrylic and oil by Dublin artist Paul MacCormaic.

The work was one of the finalists in the 2023 Zurich Portrait Prize, and forms part of an exhibition that will run in the Gallery until March.

It is one in a series by the artist called The Vanquished Writing History, through which MacCormaic seeks to give voice to the voiceless, to tell the stories of those marginalised, or ignored, or forgotten.

'I was interested in the vanquished, and especially the underclass and underdogs, and people who had been vilified, bypassed and overlooked,' he says.

An impulse to highlight stories too easily passed over, comes from MacCormaic's own background. He was born in Finglas and had to let go the dream of a place in art college to take up a job, and it wasn't until his family were reared that he devoted himself wholly to this lifetime's love.

'I had this visceral feeling, when you're a working-class lad growing up in Finglas, that your own kind, working-class people, they are not in the driving seat,' he explains.

'I just felt my kind weren't in charge. Okay, we worked, we had our jobs, we got apprenticeships, but we didn't make the rules.'

Those that did get heard, he felt, and his art is inspired by the determination to amplify those who are overlooked, or cast as outsiders.

It was during the pandemic that he got to work on The Vanquished Writing History, and Annie Murphy was a priority.

Murphy's exposure in 1992 of her affair with Bishop Eamonn Casey, and the revelation that he was the father of her son Peter, was one of the early convulsions that weakened the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland, before the gush of sexual abuse scandals that almost destroyed it over the proceeding three decades. It was her



Top of the list: Paul's painting of Annie Murphy, who he tracked down in California. Below, Paul at work



infamous Late Late Show interview with Gay Byrne in 1993 that stuck in MacCormaic's mind.

Byrne tried to wind up an unpleasant exchange with the words, 'If your son is half as good a man as is his father, he won't be doing too bad.'

It drew an instant, precise retort from Murphy. 'I'm not so bad either, Mr Byrne.'

In the 30 years since, Murphy has been an infrequent figure in Irish public life, but MacCormaic was determined to feature her in his work.

He never forgot that interview, or what he calls her 'appalling treatment' that night.

'She was part of a series of actions involving women and what women did, that brought about the secular society we now have, where we have contraception, where the Church isn't seen as this infallible entity, and the secular modern society we have

where women's issues and women's health are better looked after,' he says. 'With all of that, she was sort of a hero of mine, and when I began painting the series she was definitely on my list.'

Tracking her down was a challenge, but when he eventually spoke to her, she liked the idea.

'I started the conversation with her and told her about the series. She said she would be interested in it, a series about people who were vilified and that told their story.'

'I couldn't even send her an email, she wasn't online, so I had to send her prints of the few portraits I had done by then — I had done Vicky Phelan and Catherine Corless, and one or two others. I sent them to her in the post. She rang me on my landline and she said, "I'm in", so we arranged a time that suited her and I flew over to California and took her photograph.'

From those photos, MacCormaic produced the beautiful work now hanging in the most prestigious artistic space in the country. He has not been able to contact Annie

since, but his work is another way of memorialising the contribution of a remarkable woman.

Corless is another, her indefatigable work in exposing the Tuam babies horror setting her apart.

'She was dismissed as just a local historian,' he says. 'It was like a pejorative term, because the real historians are the ones who are in universities have their degrees and their doctorates, and local historians are seen as of limited scope and not really academic. But there was Catherine Corless, and she was digging, and digging, and digging.'

She confronted institutional resistance and dishonesty and faced it down — as did the late Vicky Phelan and the Kavanagh sisters, who made a podcast about the abuse they suffered at the hands of their father.

The courage of these people attracts MacCormaic, and their refusal to be cowed by those wielding power.

'To be a part of my series, you can't just be a victim and then sit down and do nothing; you have to

ANNIE MURPHY WAS MY HERO, I HAD TO GET HER

Her affair with Bishop Casey in 1992 caused an international scandal but it ignited a flame in artist Paul MacCormaic, who wanted to add her to the list of heroic women he'd already committed to canvas

have been someone who was campaigning,' he says.

'There are quite a few people who are survivors of the Troubles, campaigning for truth and justice. A lot of them had family that were murdered.'

'I have six people from Bloody Sunday, two or three from Belfast, Protestants and Catholics.'

He has completed nine portraits and plans 22 in total. Recent posts on his Instagram account detail a work featuring John Teggart. His father Daniel was killed in the Ballymurphy massacre in August 1971, when soldiers in the Parachute Regiment killed ten people over the course of three days.

Violence flared when internment was introduced that month, and Daniel Teggart was part of a group looking for their children when they were fired on.

A further, incomprehensible tragedy was visited on the Teggart family two years later, when John's 15-year-old brother Bernard was murdered by the IRA and falsely accused of being an informer.

Bernard and his twin brother Gerard had been abducted from a residential home, with Gerard released and Bernard's body later

found, his hands bound and a piece of cardboard stuck to his chest, with words scrawled on it that accused him of being a tout.

'John got it from both sides,' says MacCormaic. 'His father was shot 14 times in the Ballymurphy massacre by British paratroopers. Then two years later, his brother Bernard, who had special needs, was abducted by the IRA and shot, accused of being an informant.'

'They came back with an apology afterwards and said no, he wasn't. But it was too late.'

His plan is to have the series finished by March of next year. It is a compelling manifestation of his artistic ambitions, which he has described as social comment.

'I find art is a way of shining light on issues,' he says. 'I appreciate art, I do appreciate modern art and expressionist art, and art for art's sake. I don't think that's a derogatory term; I think art should

be for art's sake. But I've decided that since I have this set of skills, and I'm capable of doing portraits, that I would use my skills to document and shine a light on certain aspects of contemporary society.'

On completing his Leaving Cert in 1979, MacCormaic fizzed with excitement about what lay ahead; he had been accepted to study in the National College of Art and Design, based on his portfolio and completion of an interview.

His place was contingent on meeting modest academic targets in the Leaving. But then his father intervened, insisting that his son get a job and start bringing in a wage. A memory like that doesn't easily recede.

'I knew I had my place in art college, and all I had to get was three Ds in ordinary level subjects to get in,' he recalls now.

'They were interested in if you could draw and paint and make



Tribute: Paul's renderings of, top, Vicky Phelan and, above, the Kavanagh sisters recording their podcast

art, they weren't interested in if you were academic.

'So I was the envy of them all [his classmates], and when my dad pulled the rug from under me and put a lot of pressure on me...' he says, letting the sentence evaporate.

'I sometimes think had I stood up to him, had I argued with him more, could I have taken up my place?' he wonders.

'But he was keen to see me bring in a wage, because he was the only earner and there were ten children.'

'I could see it from his point of view, and he thought art college was all airy-fairy and not a proper job, and very few people got work at the end of it.'

'You know, he's actually right about that. The statistics on people who go to art college, they're worse than the statistics for people who open new restaurants.'

THE art continued, though, even after he started working for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, or the P&T as it was better known, and even better known latterly as Eircom; he held a number of exhibits in those years.

'I always made art, almost as a sort of cottage industry,' he says. 'The great thing about making art, unless you're a sculptor and you need welding kit and loads of space because the stuff they make is 3D, two-dimensional art is something you can do on the kitchen table.'

However, when an offer of redundancy came up in 2001, and with his own children older and his mortgage at a reasonable size, he took it.

MacCormaic went to UCD and studied the history of art, and then at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Dun Laoghaire.

He also obtained his Higher Diploma in Teaching, and taught part-time while pursuing his artistic ambitions at last.

He now lives in Kilbarrack in

north Dublin, and works from a studio at the bottom of his garden. It's a small space, he says, about 3m squared, but it is now the place where he can, finally, pour all of his energies into a passion that has animated him for all of his life.

Besides his current work, he has produced wonderful paintings fired by a lively imagination.

One, from 2001, is a double portrait, with Katie Taylor on one side and Alana Audley-Murphy, another trailblazer in Irish women's boxing, on the other.

The work is called *The Ambassadors*, named and modelled on a famous work by Hans Holbein the Younger.

Others are inspired by his local area, exploring ideas about our sense of place, and about belonging.

The importance of being able to devote himself full-time to art goes beyond the obvious benefits. There is an attitude in parts of the art world, he says, that doesn't take someone seriously if they're trying to do it part-time.

'Lots of writers, like John McGahern was a part-time farmer for a long time, and wrote,' he says, 'not that farming brings in much money, but he was accepted as one of the great writers of Ireland.'

'But the only part-time job they'll accept, the powers-that-be in the art world, is if you're a part-time lecturer in one of the colleges.'

'But anything else, you're not really taken seriously.'

'When I was still working for Eircom, I had a couple of exhibitions. I asked journalists and arts critics to come, and they didn't.'

'So I got an opportunity to leave Eircom in 2001 and accepted a redundancy package, and it's since then that I'd regard myself as a professional artist, because I've been full-time.'

None of this is said with rancour, but rather from the perspective of a man who understands the lot of the outsider, and who is interested in the forces that try to keep people out — and in those who say no, and will not be excluded.

'My dad thought art college was airy-fairy and not a proper job'