

bout two weeks ago, I was driving 50 miles from Los Angeles to the Ronald Reagan Library, where Liz Cheney was delivering a speech in the aftermath of Cassidy Hutchinson's seismic testimony before the January 6 Committee.

As Los Angeles and its exurbs fell away to reveal the Simi Valley, National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast a segment featuring journalist and author Patrick Radden Keefe. His recounting of the story of Astrid Holleeder, a Dutch lawyer living in fear of assassination by her mob boss brother, was so riveting I pulled in on a stretch of road leading to the library to follow the hypnotic tale to its unsettling end.

I was so absorbed in its final moments, I failed to notice a handful of anti-Cheney protesters advance on my car. When one of them screamed: "Read the Constitution, traitor!" at a decibel-shattering level through the window, I had completely forgotten where I was. My reaction was one of disorientation, then irritation. "For Christ's sake, shut up," I wanted to yell back. "I'm listening to this."

Few writers can transport you into their world with the skill of Radden Keefe. He has written five books which, combined with his longform investigative journalism articles, have landed him just about every journalistic and literary non-fiction award in the US.

Still boyish at 46, he has those clean-cut all-American good looks. He's almost impossibly disarming, exuding affability and a piercing intelligence. If you weren't aware of his penchant for plumbing the darkest recesses of humanity, you might assume he was a high school teacher or a paediatric doctor straight from Central Casting. Or even a therapist.

He's probably best known in these parts for his 2019 book Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland. It's a riveting, meticulously researched account of the brutal 30-year conflict. The story, distilled to its essence, focuses on a single victim and perpetrator.

The victim is Jean McConville, the 38-year-old widow and mother of ten who was dragged from her home in the Divis Flats complex on a December night in 1972 as her terrified children watched helplessly. She was never seen again. Her remains were discovered more than 30 years later on a beach near Dundalk.

The perpetrator, in Radden Keefe's account, is the late Dolours Price, who along with her sister Marian played an active role in the IRA's terror campaign of the 1970s. (Marian denies the allegations.)

Countless books have been written about the Troubles. But Radden Keefe's award-winning account is like a punch to the heart as it homes in on the human cost, the agony of families ripped apart in the crossfire. Like any great storyteller, he knows that building a vivid story is about the details. When McConville was kidnapped, she had a nappy pin clipped onto the front of her clothing – a common accessory for young mothers of that era. The pin is more than a humanising detail: it is a storytelling device that delivers its heartbreaking payoff in the book's final pages.

What makes Radden Keefe's writing so compelling, aside from the meticulous research and the dogged determination to reveal the truth, is his gift for empathy without sentimentality and his ability to reveal the bruised humanity of his subjects.

Unsurprisingly, as the title suggests, he was initially met with a wall of silence. It took four years and seven trips to the North to excavate the materials he needed and to gain the trust of those willing to talk to him.

Adams refused to be interviewed but he's used to employing the 'write around', where he will interview as many friends, enemies, family members and associates of the main characters as will talk and corroborate their accounts with official records, police and court transcripts and verified documents.

"I was sorry that he didn't speak with me," he says of Adams. "He is so careful. He is so disciplined in his message. And I think he also lives in a . . . in a kind of cone of denial, an atmosphere of mythology. So, I

don't know that I ever would've got anything all that startling or sincere

High-wire act

While Radden Keefe has Irish ancestry on his father's side and grew up in Boston when the violence in Northern Ireland was at its peak, there is no trace of Irish-American sentimentalism about him. He concedes that Say Nothing is "an uncomfortable book for people who are great supporters of Adams". But he adds: "It's also quite uncomfortable for people who hate him, because if you get to the end of the book, you see that, while I find him to be a bit chilly, I also think that he was a bit of a visionary.

"He could see around the corner, he could see that there was going to have to be a political resolution to the conflict. And then he did this incredible high-wire act of helping steer the IRA to that outcome and not getting killed along the way, and then helping to preserve the peace."

Adams isn't Radden Keefe's only reticent subject. The Sackler family spent a fortune on lawyers in an attempt to derail the publication of Empire of Pain, his award-winning deep dive into the billionaire clan and their development and marketing of the synthetic opioid Oxycontin, which devastated huge swathes of the US, creating tens of millions of addicts in impoverished communities.

A graduate of Columbia University and Yale Law School, he picked up a couple of Master's degrees at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, en route to becoming a writer. There was also a fellowship at the Pentagon, which he compared to working at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and a brief stint in Hollywood writing pilots for HBO that never got made.

A decade ago, the New Yorker magazine offered Radden Keefe a staff job, providing him with the time and resources to spend a year or more researching and writing a single story. Add the twin traits of patience and tenacity and it's a safe bet that if he starts digging, he won't stop.

"One of the great luxuries of writing for the New Yorker is that I'll tell people: I'm going to spend six months on this or eight months or a year," he says. "I tell people upfront, I'd prefer to speak with you. I want to hear your side of the story. But if for one reason or another, you choose to sit it out. I'm not going to go away.' And that, by itself, sometimes persuades people to talk because they realise: I can't stop this thing.' People know it's not a drive-by. I'm going to take the time and dig."

Mobsters, mass killers, drug overlords and black-market arms dealers are among those who have found themselves at the sharp end of Radden Keefe's shovel. His latest book, Rogues: True Stories of Grifters, Killers, Rebels and Crooks is an anthology that features a dozen articles culled from his investigative journalism with the New Yorker, and it's a masterful collection.

By Radden Keefe's own account, he mines dark psychic crevices in his search for material. The crime exposé is not the point of the story, but rather the point of entry, the lever that he uses to prise open the door to corrupt boardrooms and chilling underworlds.

The book includes a 2014 feature he wrote about the capture of El Chapo, the notorious Mexican drug lord who was at the time languishing in a Mexican prison and feeling disinclined to talk to the media. Included in the piece is a riveting and occasionally hilarious account of the logistics involved in ensuring El Chapo didn't run out of Viagra, a narrative in which the Mexican media subsequently revelled.

The collection concludes with Radden Keefe's evocative account of a trip to Vietnam with the writer and presenter Anthony Bourdain – an odd choice, perhaps, given his bedfellows in this collection, but one who fits squarely under the "rebels" heading. Bourdain's 2018 death by suicide affected Radden Keefe deeply. "We had stayed in touch and did a few events together," he says. "There was a wonderful night, not too long before he died, where we went out late. There's a great bar in Manhattan called the Old Town Bar and we closed it down – him and my wife and me.

"I was shocked. I didn't see it coming. I knew he was in a very dark place, but I didn't quite appreciate how bad it was. It was very upsetting. I still think about him all the time, which I think is a testament to the sheer life force of the guy."

Like any 'greatest hits' collection, readers will quibble about the ones that didn't make the cut: Radden Keefe's profile, for example, of HR McMaster, Trump's former national security adviser, or his mesmerising portrait of Boston mobster Whitey Bulger. And then, of course, there's his devastating takedown of the Sackler family and unveiling of the Oxycontin scandal, his account of which was first published in the New Yorker in 2017. His subsequent book Empire of Pain dominated almost every critic's list of top ten non-fiction books when it was published last year.

It's not surprising that Netflix, Hulu and HBO have all come calling, looking to adapt his stories into films and mini-series. Say Nothing was optioned by Hollywood before the print had dried on the first edition by the Emmy-winning producers of American Crime Story.

Grim prognosis

Until now, Radden Keefe has steered away from the well–ploughed furrows of Donald Trump, although he's written about several of the characters on the periphery of Trumpworld, including Mark Burnett, the creator of The Apprentice, the vehicle that transformed Trump from a failed property developer into an illusory mogul with the Midas touch.

Radden Keefe's curiosity was piqued by the East London former British army recruit, who arrived in the US as an illegal immigrant, and parlayed a brief marriage to a wealthy Californian (he's now married to Irish actress Roma Downey) into a career as one of the most successful reality TV producers in the world and head of MGM Television.

The Apprentice was Trump's springboard into presidential politics. That is Burnett's real legacy, Radden Keefe says. "It was this idea that politics is just entertainment. We're all living with the consequences of that. To some extent, I think Boris Johnson is emblematic of that as well."

After Burnett, he had intended to write a profile of Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. But he said he ditched the project after realising that he'd be contributing to the "politics as entertainment" industry. "If I'm not adding value, then it just becomes entertainment. And if it's just entertainment, then how am I any better than Mark Burnett?"

So, what's next? Of the cast of characters that has been arrayed before the January 6 Committee, Radden Keefe would most like to write about Stewart Rhodes, his Yale Law School classmate and founder of the Oathkeepers, the right-wing militia whose connection to Trump is currently under scrutiny.

The conversation segues into America's future as a functioning democracy. His prognosis is grim. "With the caveat that I'm a glass-half-empty kind of person, I think we are in Humpty Dumpty territory," he says. "I think things are really bad. They're dire. And the worst of it is, I don't see a correction coming soon."

He loves this country, he concludes, "but I might be in the market for an Irish passport soon". \blacksquare

Patrick Radden Keefe will be part of First Thought Talks at Galway International Arts Festival, in conversation with Caitriona Crowe at 4pm on July 23, O'Donoghue Theatre, NUI Galway. See giaf.ie

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Coverstory

Art cannot tame Shane for the same reason that no one has ever tamed a Tasmanian devil'

London's Andipa Gallery is used to exhibiting artists such as Banksy, Hirst, Picasso and Renoir; added to that list now is work by Shane MacGowan who talks to **Marion McKeone** about life and his limited-edition book of artwork, lyrics and essays

coris Andipa, the soft-spoken, exquisitely mannered owner of the renowned Andipa Gallery, knows a thing or two about art. He should do. The Andipa family has been in the art business since the late 16th century when the Doge of Venice gifted them a coat of arms in recognition of their contribution to the art world.

Today, Andipa is one of the art world's most respected experts, dealers and curators. He's the go-to dealer for Banksy and has curated several international exhibitions of the artist's works, which now fetch as much as €20 million each. His roster of artists includes Damien Hirst, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Monet, Renoir, Miro and Picasso.

The morning after the night before, we're sitting in his gallery in Knightsbridge. The night before being the preview party for Shane MacGowan's first art exhibition and the British launch of The Eternal Buzz and the Crock of Gold, his limited-edition book of artwork, lyrics and essays. The only sign of the previous night's bacchanal is the 100 plus empty champagne bottles that are neatly stacked near the doorway.

The London launch is a riotous blow-out of an evening. Waldemar Januszczak, the larger than life art critic, acts as a sort of unofficial emcee for the evening alongside Victoria Clarke, MacGowan's wife. Shane sits in a corner away near the back of the gallery, looking bemused but happy.

"Buy, Buy, Buuuuyyyyyy!" Januszczak exhorts the cheering crowd after an enthusiastic and frequently hilarious speech.

A keen champion of MacGowan's work, he wrote the foreword for The Eternal Buzz and the Crock of Gold, a 500-page limited edition collection of MacGowan's drawings, doodles, paintings, scribbles and writing. Over the rapidly escalating noise level, he tells me that of all the music icons who have forayed into the art world — Lou Reed and Bob Dylan among them — Shane is the only authentic artist

"Art cannot tame Shane for the same sorts of reasons that no one has ever tamed a Tasmanian devil. It can't be done," he observes.

It was Januszczak that Clarke initially approached for an objective assessment of the merits, or lack thereof, of MacGowan's artwork. His response prompted her to send a PDF of the work to Andipa, who immediately decided he wanted to host an exhibition.

Andipa confesses that he's never experienced anything like MacGowan's exhibition launch. He's not just talking about the unbridled revelry, or the motley assortment of young and ageing punks, musicians, friends, family and minor aristocracy that were jammed into the gallery. "I've never encountered anything like the love I could feel for Shane and Victoria," he says. "It was just . . . marvellous."

He radiates a quiet satisfaction in the success of Shane's somewhat unlikely launch as an artist. By the end of the evening, at least half of the 20 artworks display orange sold stickers.

"Well, I'm kind of an instinctive dealer and collector, so I wasn't surprised by the response," he says during our conversation the following day. "Most of my clients are more about art than investments and the commodification of art and all the nonsense that goes on today. So, the authenticity of Shane's work, I think, is what transmits so clearly and so powerfully that people just get it."

That MacGowan's name now features on Andipa's roster of artists – sandwiched between Roy Lichtenstein and Henri Matisse on the gallery's website – is an astonishing achievement, one of those collisions of serendipity, chutzpah and talent that have defined MacGowan's success to date.

A week or so later, we're sitting in MacGowan and Clarke's Ballsbridge apartment on a wet Tuesday evening. Clarke, whose cooking has come a long way since the London days, has prepared an impressive spread of champagne and scallops, lasagne and chocolate cake.

When I joke that marriage has improved her culinary skills, MacGowan gazes up at her affectionately. "She's always been great at cooking," he says softly. "She's always been great at everything. She's still great."

"And we've finally won the economic war," he jokes, as he raises his glass in celebration. He's referencing the British-Irish economic war of the 1950s. Now he observes, people in Ireland are drinking champagne on a Tuesday night while "the Brits have f***ed themselves with Brexit".

In the interests of full disclosure, I've known Mac-Gowan and Clarke for more than 30 years. We met in London in the mid-1980s. Following their move to Dublin they stayed at my house in Portobello for an extended stretch. I attended their wedding in 2018.

Having rushed to the altar with indecent haste, they still seem to be in the honeymoon phase. Their 30-year courtship had its share of break-ups, turmoil and drama, about which they are remarkably frank and sanguine. But they both agree things are a lot calmer now, although MacGowan's inner punk remains defiantly intact.

He's still buoyed by the success of the London exhibition and what was his first trip outside of Dublin and Tipperary in several years. When we talk, it is before the Dublin launch of his book and he's nervous. For MacGowan, Ireland is the only critic that really counts. We chat over a backtrack of Van Morrison which in turn competes with traditional Irish music on television.

Their lifestyle is surprisingly modest. They're not rich by any means. The millions MacGowan made during the Pogues' heyday have disappeared. He spent with abandon, a sizeable chunk was absorbed by loans and handouts and unsurprisingly, some of it was siphoned off by various people on the periphery of MacGowan's orbit.

They lived relatively comfortably on royalties and Clarke, a journalist and writer who also channels angels, had her own income before the cost of MacGowan's healthcare generated additional financial pressure.

Money doesn't interest MacGowan. He doesn't believe in hoarding it, he says, because it "clogs up the flow". He's generous to a fault. On several occasions, I've seen him discreetly hand a fat roll of notes to a homeless person. On nights out in London and Dublin, he'd invariably pick up the tab for everyone.

He's never had any desire to buy a house — one of the few topics on which he and his wife differ. They live in a small, ground-floor rental apartment, cluttered with art and books and CDs. A hospital bed takes up a chunk of a living room that also serves as a dining room and TV room. It's chaotic, but cosy and welcoming. The walls radiate with Victoria's art; large paintings of angels in brilliant colours.

It was in Tipperary as a young child that MacGowan first became obsessed with one of his favourite themes; religion and the frequently gruesome stories of inquisitions, crusades and the torture of saints. Always a precocious reader, he tore through the gospels and New Testament long before his first communion.

The Bible for punks

During the conversation, Shane decides I'm in need of a religious primer, and I'm treated to a punk revision of the New Testament. An excerpt of the gospel according to Shane goes like this:

"The Pharisees really put the boot in. They were real f***ing bastards and later when the apostles were being hunted by the Romans and the Pharisees and they were f***ing terrified, so Jesus sent back the holy ghost and it came into the room and landed on their heads and they were all looking at each other with a flame on their heads.

"Their heads weren't on fire or anything. The holy ghost just left the flame in them and with that came incredible courage and the ability to heal. A lot of them ended up being crucified just to go through what he (Jesus) went through which when you think about it was really horrific.

"All that suffering I didn't really understand it ... But when Jesus got crucified and he'd been hanging there for a while, he was in a complete state, obviously. And that was when he shouted out 'Oh my God, why have you forsaken me?'

"He could have got down from the cross if he wanted to, but when the soldiers and the criminals who were hung up beside him said 'if you're really God save yourself', Jesus sussed out it was the devil trying to tempt him, so he said to Satan, 'F*** OFFFFF!'."

According to MacGowan, Paul wanted to one-up Peter by also being crucified upside down. "Well, the Roman guards didn't want to do it so he said 'Civis Romanus sum' which means 'Tm a Roman citizen' and that gives you the right to be crucified any f***ing way you like."

Ah, the perks of being a Roman. This entire lesson has been condensed into the second verse of "Jesus Got The Horrors", a new MacGowan composition.

'When they crucified him in a Roman jail

He said "upside down" and they turned him round And banged in the rusty nails

"Roman citizen!" said Paul, "upside down! you shower of shits" Sebastian got it up the arse and an arrow in his tits.' Channelling Jesus, he writes;

'I'd rather spend my money where the twelve



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apostles sit

Than have it all pissed away by greedy little shits Your teagues, your prods, your yankee slobs All dvina for a poke

Get their balls sucked in their brand new cars And rub their dicks with coke.

On we meander, discussing Martin McDonagh, Flann O'Brien and James Stephens, the connection between Freemasons and town planning and his ancestors' involvement in the fight for Irish independence.

He tells me his paternal grandfather and his mother's uncle John knew each other "long, long before" his parents ever met. "But they couldn't say anything. It was a secret that could never be told', he says, nodding meaningfully

"They had a gay relationship?" I respond, envisaging a Brokeback Mountain scenario, complete with Black and Tans and bullets

"Wha . . . ? NO!" he exclaims, his blue eyes fairly popping out of his head with incredulity. He exhales a igh of exasperation and slowly shakes his head, like a teacher dealing with a particularly dim-witted student.

"They knew each other, right? They had both carried out orders from (Michael) Collins, but they were sworn to secrecy, yeah? So, when they met when my parents were getting married, they could never let on they knew each other."

The MacGowan side of the family is populated by academics and intellectuals. Shane's father, Maurice. a UCD graduate in economics, moved to England in the 1950s to work as an accounts executive for the C&A department store. He was a voracious reader who introduced a young MacGowan to all the literary greats. Now aged 90, he continues to read the classics in Greek He may have inherited his intellect and love of literature from the MacGowans, but his love of Irish music and revelry, he says, came from his mother's family.

The Eternal Buzz and The Crock of Gold provides a deep dive into MacGowan's emotional and creative plumbing. It's gloriously free of the restraints of political correctness; Jesus in Limerick features a particularly battered looking Christ on the cross exclaiming "It'll be a long, long time before I spend Easter in Limerick again!" as the Virgin Mary (or Mary Magdalene) sits chugging a bottle of booze at his feet.

Some of the images are shockingly violent. The final entry is a drawing of an executioner, cigarette hanging from his lips as he decapitates his prisoner while singing Panis Angelicus.

Others are gleefully profane. Ich Liebe Dick is an image of a woman with impossibly pneumatic breasts defiantly intact performing oral sex. There are portraits of fellow musicians from Grace Jones to Bono. A drawing inspired by Victoria features only her lips, almost obliterated by swirling planets, tabs of acid, eyes of Horus, crosses and spaceships.

MacGowan, who has a prodigious knowledge of art, cites Dali, Caravaggio, Max Ernst, and Cezanne as influences, along with Irish impressionists Yeats and Lavery. His art is very much a matter of interpretation, even to MacGowan. "This is a musician, leaning against his guitar," he says of one drawing, then pauses and adds "Or he could be a gravedigger leaning on his shovel."

America features as a source of inspiration. For Shane



Clarke Life is much calmer now although MacGowan's inner punk

moon landings. Greetings From Vegas features a syringe in an eyeball in a blood-soaked Martini. This was drawn on the morning of Spider Stacy's wedding in Vegas, where Shane acted as best man. For MacGowan, Las Vegas – and most of the stops on the later American tours - are places he'd rather forget.

"By the time the Pogues got to Vegas, Shane was hooked on smack and having to drink several bottles of gin every day just to get through the tours," Clarke recalls.

It was a hellish time for both of them. Years ago, I received a postcard from Shane from somewhere in the US. "I wouldn't 'wish you were here' on my worst f***ing enemy," he'd scrawled on the back.

Part of his unhappiness stemmed from Victoria's absence from some of the tours, when they were distilled to a dozen blokes on a bus doing more than 300 gigs a year across four continents. On the road non-stop but rarely seeing more than their hotel, the venue and adjacent bars. He's told me previously he prefers the company of women – or mixed company – to the company of men. "Women elevate the conversation,"

homage to the original - James Stephens's The Crock of Gold – which was published in 1912. Part art folio, part scrapbook of the past six decades, it includes memorabilia and photos from his early childhood, along with early compositions - including a treatise he wrote in primary school explaining the futility of rules. It's a philosophy that has served him well over the decades. MacGowan has mostly done things his own way.

His music, and also his art, stems from a fusion of his two most formative experiences. The first is the lengthy stretches of time he spent in Tipperary as a child. For him it was a magical place of untrammelled freedom. of ghost-hunting, fairy forts and learning how to do wheelies on a tractor.

His aunts and uncles doted on him and his sister Siobhan and allowed them free rein. The only sin, according to MacGowan, was disrespecting the Catholic faith, the blessed Virgin or Jesus. Tipperary was where music and dancing and storytelling and gambling and drinking and the rosary were all part of the same tapestry, interwoven by fierce familial bonds.

An encounter with the devil

The other formative experience occurred when the MacGowan family moved from the verdant, spacious suburbs of Tunbridge Wells, where they had a strong network of relatives and friends, to an apartment in London's Barbican Centre. Shane was around 13 at the time and had won a scholarship to Westminster, a prestigious public school.

The Barbican is best known as a cultural hub that contains the largest performing arts centre in Europe. But for the MacGowan family the brutalist architecture. the vast treeless sprawl and residential complex of 2,000 flats and houses was a disorienting and distressing experience. The isolation and acres of concrete caused MacGowan to become severely depressed and anxious. He developed a voracious appetite for drugs, consuming vast quantities of anything he could get his hands on. He was expelled from Westminster for selling drugs to his classmates.

One of his drawings - which features a knife through an eyeball – was done around that time, shortly after he says he had a terrifying encounter with Satan. He was "test piloting drugs with a friend" when the devil appeared, foul-smelling and howling.

"It was very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very frightening," he recalls. "Probably the most frightening thing that ever happened to me in my life.'

Does he believe in hell? "There isn't a hell." he responds emphatically. Typically, MacGowan has a bewildering array of facts, obscure writings and official documents to back up his assertion. On the other hand MacGowan is a firm believer in heaven which he believes will see him reunited with his mother. Therese. who died on New Year's Day in 2017

Her death is one of the few topics he's unable to talk about. It triggered a year-long depression, compounded by the fact that he had become wheelchair-bound after breaking his pelvis and shattering his kneecap in separate falls.

Among the other frightening episodes he'd rather forget was his committal to the notorious Bedlam psychiatric hospital in London for six months as a teenager. In between his encounter with Satan and his committal, he returned to Tipperary for a while. But the relatives who had heaped affection on him during his childhood had all died, except for his uncle John.

drink bottles of stout and throw the empties at each other. We were always trying to miss because we didn't hate each other. We were just pissed off because there was no one left. It could have been eternally depressing, but it was sort of uplifting. We were both full of rage, but we got it out of us in the end.'

The London scene

His release from Bedlam coincided with the arrival of punk music on the London scene. His sister Siobhan. a singer/songwriter turned novelist, says that punk saved Shane, giving him a purpose and a conduit for his anger and creative energy.

He used to wear a jacket made from a Union Jack and he'd scrawl IRA on his forehead. For MacGowan there's no conflict. He has nothing against British people. He's a fan of the Queen and had a bit of a thing for Princess Margaret.

It's all part of the kaleidoscope, the walking contradiction that is Shane MacGowan. He's loved London since the late 1970s when he attended his first Sex Pistols gig, shortly after his release from "the nut house". Many of his friends, and most of his bandmates were English or second and third generation Irish.

But he's also an unrepentant advocate of a united Ireland. He heard stories about the savagery of the Black and Tans from his Tipperary relatives, whose neighbours and friends and families experienced their brutality first-hand

He struck up a friendship with Gerry Adams when the latter used to travel to London in the 1990s for backroom talks with Tony Blair. Since then the two have remained firm friends. Adams is a frequent visitor to chez MacGowan.

His song about the wrongful convictions of the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four, a blistering indictment of British injustice, was banned from the airwaves in Britain and prompted questions in the Houses of Parliament. When both sets of verdicts were eventually overturned, Paddy Hill credited MacGowan with invigorating their campaign for justice. He and Gerry Conlon became close friends.

MacGowan holds bewildering amounts of knowledge in his head. His alcohol and drug consumption has plummeted over the years. Marriage suits him. On a good evening, he's a gregarious raconteur of stories, shifting seamlessly from Irish folklore to Greek classics, the factual and the fantastical, interspersed with a malevolent chuckle and spontaneous bursts of song.

On a bad one, he's monosyllabic, gazing vacantly at the television, alternatively ignoring questions or spitting out responses. His moods can be fitful, skittering from ebullient to irascible in a matter of seconds.

In fact, MacGowan is like the Irish summer, Storm clouds and tempests tend to pass fairly quickly, giving way to breezy spells interspersed with the odd thunderclap and flash of lightning.

Over the years, I've witnessed him apparently fall asleep in bars and restaurants, only to later repeat conversations that went on around him verbatim. Why does he feign a comatose state?

He shrugs. "Because sometimes I just want to listen," he says. For all his swagger and wit, he's extremely shy and is uncomfortable being the centre of attention. Which may be one of the reasons he hates interviews

so much.

I've met several journalists from prestigious publications who have confessed to being "scared shitless" of MacGowan because of his irascibility and unpredictability When I mentioned this to him in the past, he seemed surprised. and perturbed. You can ask him anything, he said, so long as he hasn't been asked it a hundred times previously.

From the outset, MacGowan was clear about his mission as a musician - to revive traditional Irish music by injecting an adrenaline shot of punk into its veins. "You can't just keep singing the old songs. You have to add to the tradition," he says. The early vears of the Pogues were among his happiest

His hard-living lifestyle attracted more attention "We were both bored and pissed off," he says. "We'd than his music, but MacGowan was always working, scribbling lyrics on whatever scrap of paper he could find. He'd carefully and expertly remove the top layer of a beermat to reveal a pristine surface beneath which he'd use as a miniature canvas, repeating the process half a dozen times during the course of an evening. Many of them have made their way onto the pages of The Eternal Buzz

But more haven't. When it was time to move on to the next pub or club or gig, unless Clarke was present, the raw materials for a new song were, more often than not discarded

Nick Cave, a close friend and occasional collaborator of Shane's for about four decades, once told me he could hardly bear to contemplate the untold number of embryonic MacGowan classics that were literally trodden underfoot.

Several years ago, I asked MacGowan if he was concerned that he may have left the makings of an untold number of songs on the floors of North London pubs. He shrugged and replied that if the lyrics he'd scrawled on a beermat or napkin were any good he'd probably have remembered them anyway.

He believes that songs and tunes are ethereal things that float around in the atmosphere, waiting for someone to channel them, record them and preserve them on vinvl or other medium. Other times he's likened inspiration to tuning a radio and hitting a frequency of lyrics and melodies that only he can hear. Either way, he believes that if he doesn't claim them as his own, some other songwriter will

But it's a matter of huge pride to him that he was at the vanguard of the Irish music revival of the 1980s. fusing punk and traditional Irish music and providing it with the iolt of adrenaline it needed. Somewhere around 1986, after the critical and commercial acclaim of the Pogues' third album, If I Should Fall From Grace With God, his drink and drug-fuelled twilight world of non-stop touring began to lose its appeal. MacGowan began to dread what he had once relished.

He claims it was the Pogues' move away from the traditional Irish/punk fusion and towards more rockbased influences that was the original source of the tensions that eventually led to his being fired from the band in 1991, which he agrees was long overdue. His fellow Pogues would disagree, suggesting it was Shane's descent into drink and drug addiction that was the issue.

Creature of the night

Being wheelchair-bound is a cause of frustration to him, although Clarke says he rarely complains about the physical discomfort. We talk about London and Dublin which he describes in one of his artworks as the City That Never Awakes. "Dublin's a great city, but for me it's not anymore," he says referring to his mobility problems. "Now I'm . . . institutionalised in this . . . " he gestures around the apartment, as a look of despair fleetingly crosses his face.

His lapses into depression are understandable. For decades he was in perpetual motion. In London during the 1980s he cut a tall, whippet-thin dash, propelled with a ferocious energy that was likely more quelled than enhanced by unfeasible amounts of drink and drugs. He and Cave were vampiric creatures, roaming the bars and clubs of Soho and North London until dawn, ghostly pale and glassy-eyed, invariably dressed in black.





Images from The Eternal Buzz and The Crock of Gold, a limited edition book by Shane MacGowan

For years following his and Clarke's relocation to

Dublin, he was a regular in Lillie's Bordello and several

other late-night haunts. There was a heady period in

the late 1990s where permutations of MacGowan, Van Morrison, Ierry Lee Lewis, Keith Richards, various U2 members and their entourages gathered around tables until the early hours But aside from the recent forays to London for the exhibition launch and the launch of his book in Dub-

lin on November 8, MacGowan rarely ventures out. During the pandemic he was entirely housebound. Mostly he approaches the shrinking of his world with equanimity, but the recent trip to London made him restless. His days are still spent drawing and writing, interspersed with listening to music and watching violent gangster movies.

"Idon't read any more," he says when I ask what he's reading. "I haven't really read in years." Contemporary Irish writers are, by and large, a little too "pompous" for his liking. His taste runs more to Joyce and Behan, Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh. "They wrote about the suffering and hardships and essence of Irish people with insight and humour," he says. Now with few exceptions, 'they're all bloody whingers".

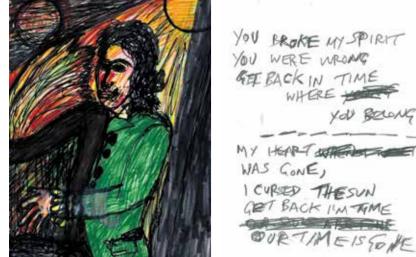
He's started writing and recording again after a decade-plus hiatus and confesses he's done with the concept of democracy in a band. The Pogues cured him of that notion, he says, after he lost the battle over the hand's musical direction. But MacGowan has few regrets and bears no grudges.

"Not forgiving things is really stupid. Because it means vou've got hate in your heart. And you don't want hate in your heart. You want love in your heart?

But sometimes, he allows "you have to do something. Discipline them?

"Yeah, beat them up! Then you can forgive them when they're lying on the ground. Not dead, you know. Just begging for mercy." ■

The Eternal Buzz and the Crock of Gold is a limited edition of 1,000 books, each with a signed certificate of ownership. It's available to order on shanemacgowan.com







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No sign of credits rolling on Hollywood strike as Universal makes unkindest cut

Morale remains high on the picket lines despite the scorching temperatures in LA



Marion **McKeone** in the US

n 2006, Alan Smyth went to Hollywood. The Irish actor, whose credits included productions in the Gate and Abbey theatres, Ballykissangel, The Clinic and a five-year stint on Fair City, was cast in a 2002 Showtime movie that was filmed in Ireland.

The producers and director were so impressed by the actor that they urged him to move Stateside and sponsored his visa application. The move played out like Smyth's very own Hollywood movie – initially at least.

His first audition landed him a role on CBS's hugely successful CSI New York series, the actor's equivalent of winning the lottery. From then he worked pretty much non-stop. "CBS cast me in a lot of other stuff they were producing," Smyth says.

Over the next decade he landed roles in some of the most popular shows on American television including NCIS, Criminal Minds and Leverage, where he acted alongside Oscar winner Timothy Hutton. Most recently, he appeared in the Emmy-winning series Better Things.

He describes himself as a jobbing actor who tends to get cast as "the villain or the weird guy". It wasn't going to buy him a mansion in Bel-Air but it was well-paid, steady work.

He remembers receiving his first residual cheque for \$3,000 in 2007 for one episode of CSI. "I said to my mate who worked full-time at CBS, 'I've already been paid for this', and he said 'that's just your residual'. I remember saying to him, 'can I actually spend this?' and he laughed," Smyth says.

The disappearance of residual money, the bread and butter for jobbing actors, is one of the main bones of contention in the actors and writers' strike that has ground Hollywood to a standstill.

Before Covid – and before streaming all but obliterated residual payments -Smyth was receiving around \$60,000 a year in residual cheques alone. Last year, he made just \$1,400.

Still, he said he's better off than the vast majority of actors that he currently pounds the pavement with on picket lines outside Los Angeles' major studios. He's in demand as an audio book reader, and he occasionally works as a production coordinator on photo shoots and commercials.

The vast majority of actors supplement their incomes as Uber drivers or waiters. Some 87 per cent of SAG-AF-TRA's 160,000 members don't make enough money to qualify for the union's health insurance programme, which requires a minimum yearly income of \$26,470.

The one thing the strike has done so far, Smyth said, is disabuse the public of the notion that actors are pampered elites who can command \$20 million for a few weeks' work.



At a SAG-AFTRA press conference ten days ago, Fran Drescher, star of the hit series The Nanny and president of the union, laid out the issues in stark terms, and launched a blistering attack on studio bosses

The mood in the room was one of anger and steely determination, and it's a sentiment that has been replicated at picket lines around Los Angeles, from the CBS studios at Beverly Boulevard to the Universal Studios on Barham Boulevard. Visits to half a dozen picket lines

over the past week suggest that morale is high, temperatures notwithstanding. The broiling heatwave that continues to plague Los Angeles has done little to deter the tens of thousands of actors and writers on picket lines. Their placards make for entertaining

reading. The 160,000 striking actors have joined forces with the 11,500 Writers Guild of America members who have been on strike since early May.

The mood is summed up by David Simon, creator and showrunner of the acclaimed HBO series The Wire, who quipped; "Now that actors are striking with me, we're going to workshop the hell out of my rage and entertain picket lines with exquisitely profane one-act plays.

This Land Is Your Land, the Woody Guthrie song that has become the anthem of American unions, blares from speakers outside Amazon's Culver City studios, then segues to Snoop Dogg and Dr Dre. This is Los Angeles, after all.

The incessant traffic provides a non-stop cacophony of hooting horns in support. Los Angeles public opinion is, for now at least, very much on the

side of the actors and writers. But the strikes have seen dozens of ancillary businesses grind to a standstill. Hundreds of small businesses and sole traders make their livings from servicing the industry, but the coffee shops, dry cleaners, drivers, caterers, prop shops and florists who rely on the studios have seen their incomes

"It's like Covid, only worse, because at least then we had some government assistance," the manager of Belli Fratelli Roasters, a coffee shop across the road from the massive Disney studio complex in Burbank, tells me. "I honestly don't know if we're going to get through this.

Still, she's firmly on the side of the actors and writers. "Something's got to give here . . . [the studios and streamers] can't keep making more and more

> less," she says. Universal Studios triggered a furious response when it trees, whose dense

and paying less and

pruned rows of ficus foliage had been providing picketers outside its Barham Boulevard entrance with shelter from the blistering heat, back to their barks and branches

spokeswoman said the pruning, which was carried out without the necessary permit according to a spokesman for LA's city controller Ken Mejia, wasn't intended to target the picketers. But the move has prompted an investiga-

Alan Smyth: the

just \$1,400 in

Irish actor made

residual payments



Universal pruned rows of ficus trees which had provided shelter from the blistering heat

tion; the trees, which are outside the Universal perimeter, belong to the City of Los Angeles.

The studios' perspective is very different to the unions. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) which represents entertainment giants such as Disney, Paramount, Netflix and Warner Bros Discovery claims SAG-AFTRA and the WGA have distorted the offers it has

made to the unions. In an emailed statement, it claimed to have offered more than \$1 billion in concessions, including an 11 per cent pay increase for background actors, stand-ins and doubles, limitations on studio demands that actors underwrite the cost of audition tapes, and a partial return to in-person auditions.

It said it also tabled an AI proposal that it claims would protect actors' likenesses, and a substantial increase in High-Budget Subscription Video on Demand (HBSVOD) foreign residuals. HBSVOD programmes are essentially streaming or online derivatives of an

existing film or TV series. The AMPTP has denied SAG-AF-TRA's claims that it intends to require background actors to sign over their likeness for use in perpetuity, meaning that an extra who is paid for one day's work could have his or her image rep-

licated by AI and used in an unlimited number of background scenes in fu-

At the time of writing, it hadn't responded to a Business Post request for larity on the issue.

But the terms that are on offer do little to address the issue of residuals. Until recently, actors who had one-off or recurring roles in television series like Friends or Law & Order received a payment for every rerun or broadcast in overseas territories.

The success of a show was easy to gauge because of the Nielsen ratings system. But streaming giants like Netflix are not required to provide numbers for their shows, or pay residuals according to how many times they are

It's difficult to feel sympathy for A-listers like Jennifer Aniston, who received \$20 million a year for the old rope of residuals on top of \$1 million per episode of Friends. But the cast of the sitcom represents the upper 0.001 per cent of Hollywood actors. For the 135,000 or so who make less than \$26,450 a year, residuals are an economic lifeline that has been cut.

Streaming giants pay the lead actors on mega hit shows like Game of Thrones up to \$1 million per episode, ensuring they're less likely to fret about residuals. But support and guest actors make the SAG-AFTRA minimum of around \$7,000 to \$9,000 per episode.

They routinely made at least that amount again when the show was re-broadcast on television. But streaming has slashed the residual rate to two cents on every dollar an actor would receive for television residuals.

Orange is the New Black, one of Netflix's first mega hits, is cited by many of the actors on the Sunset Boulevard picket line as representing the beginning of the end.

Kimiko Glenn, who played Brook Soso in the award-winning comedy ensemble, says she received just \$27.34 for a year's worth of residuals.

The series, which ran from 2013 to 2019, surpassed Game of Thrones in terms of viewership at its peak, paid its actors, mostly women of colour, a fraction what the lead actors in Thrones were receiving.

Netflix refuses to release viewership data for any of its shows.

Analysts, studios and negotiators agree on one thing; there's no end in sight. Television studios believe it could be 2024 before shows like CBS's The Stephen Colbert Show or NBC's The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon are back on air.

The 2023 Emmy awards are unlikely to happen on schedule, and film and streamer studios in the US likewise say it could be next year before cameras start rolling again. Meanwhile, actors are refusing to promote new releases, although it hasn't dampened enthusiasm for summer blockbusters like Barbie and Oppenheimer.

This weekend's annual ComicCon gathering in San Diego, which draws more than 150,000 fans of Marvel and other franchises, many of them kitted out like their action heroes, will take place without Hugh Jackman, Ryan Gosling or the other franchise stars for whom it is usually a mandatory date in the marketing calendar.

Moody's has predicted that eventually the studios will provide new contracts at a cost of around \$600 million a year. Meanwhile, stocks in Netflix, which generates much of its original content in other territories,