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# LIFE/STYLE

Tuesday, 4 October, 2022

## Childcare needs to manny up

There is still a stigma around men working in childcare in Ireland, so what can be done about it? **Jonathan deBurca Butler** asks the experts

INTERNATIONAL Nannies Week was celebrated recently and if ever there was a profession worth lauding, it's this one. Every sticky, finger-squished chocolate biscuit, or slobbery kiss our hard-working nannies get is fully deserved. As they celebrate, there is a minority among their number who might be slightly more muted, particularly in Ireland. The male nanny, or "manny" as they are known, is a rare sight on these shores and it might be time we saw more of them.

"The vast majority of our caregivers are female," says Catherine Wickham of MindME.ie, an agency dedicated to finding the right nanny for their clients. "Unfortunately, there is a lot of stigma around male nannies and men in childcare generally. A male carer can be just as safe, caring, and responsible as a female one and ultimately, we would like to see parents screening the caregiver not the gender." Actress Fiona O'Carroll hired her first male nanny at the request of her sons.

"I have four boys," says the star of *Mrs Brown's Boys*. "We were on the lookout for someone new to look after them and they asked if we could get a boy to do it." The search proved quite difficult, but eventually Fiona met and interviewed Franco.

"He is from Chile and was over here to improve his English," she recalls. "I sat down with him for 20 minutes and knew straight away he was the person for the job. I just got a good vibe from him. I was following my boys' lead and I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a big brother around." Franco moved in with his adopted family just before lockdown in March 2020 and though much of the communication was done through Google Translate for the first few months, he became integral to the family.

The mechanical engineer moved back home earlier this year and now Aitor from the Basque Country has taken over the reins.

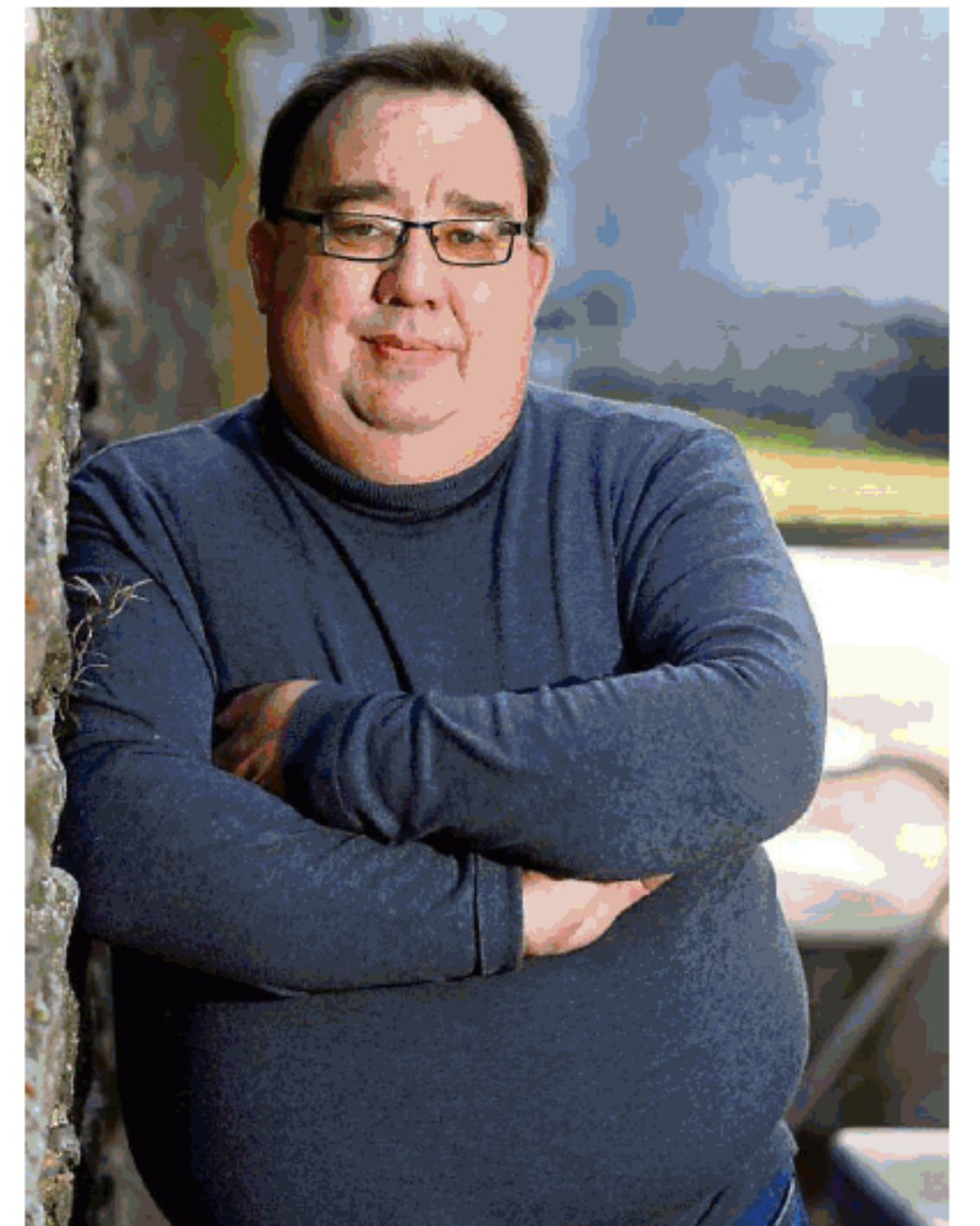
"He sent 100 applications before he found us," says Fiona, "and only got 20 replies. One included a response from a man who said he'd never let another man look after his daughters." Male nannies like Franco and Aitor are few and far between and that dearth is reflected in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector too.

When it comes to numbers of men working in ECCE, Ireland is way behind many of its European counterparts. Just 2% of the workforce is male, compared to 16% in Germany and a whopping 20% in Norway.

So while children are growing up in a society that is focusing more than ever on equality issues, many children in ECCE have no contact with men between drop off and going-home time.



Fiona O'Carroll with her sons Felix (14), Eli (12), Isaac (8), and Dexter (6) with Aitor, their manny, who is originally from Spain. Picture: Moya Nolan



Mick Kenny runs two childcare facilities in Urlingford and Johnstown in Kilkenny. Picture: Dylan Vaughan

Mick Kenny is one of the exceptions. The Kilkenny native manages two community services in Urlingford and Johnstown and has been working in the sector since the mid 1990s.

"When I was young, I was very involved in the scouts and I loved the idea of being in the community and helping people," he says.

After school Mick took a place on a FÁS scheme that brought him into the then burgeoning profession of special needs assistants. After a few years working as a special needs assistant, he enrolled in one of the first childcare courses then available in Kilkenny and after qualifying he applied for a job as a childcare worker in the Kilkenny Childcare Project.

"Much to my surprise, I got the job," says Mick. "I think the fact that the manager had worked in Manchester for years and was used to having men working in centres over there meant she was keen on men being in the sector." For the first two weeks in his new job, Mick "hid behind the fountain" because he "didn't want to upset the kids".

### Some parents are uncomfortable with the idea of a man working in childcare

"On the first morning when the parents came in to drop off their kids, the kids hadn't a bother on them but a few of the parents' jaws dropped," says Mick. "It wasn't that they were necessarily worried, it's just that they didn't expect to see me there." Mick, the children he worked with and their parents quickly got used to his presence but the sector as a whole still has a long way to go. While equality in what were traditionally male only work-

forces such as the gardai and the army is slowly heading in the right direction, it is not being mirrored in traditionally female dominated workforces.

So why are there so few men working in the childcare sector in Ireland?

"I think it comes down to our history," says Leah Russell, a lecturer in early childhood education and care at Progressive Colleges, Dublin. "If you look back at our constitution and how it was set up, women were kept at home, and up until the very late 70s women couldn't work once they got married. When that changed and women went back out to work, early childhood education was more about facilitating that shift so women could get into the workforce. It wasn't about the education side of it and really it still isn't valued as part of education in Ireland."

That's despite the fact that the early years in a person's life are perhaps the most critical when it comes to their development.

"We know from studies in neuroscience and reports that the first five

years of a person's life are the most important in terms of their brain development," says Leah. "We are laying the foundations for who these people will be and people don't really understand that I think. For most, it's about having a place for your child while you can go to work. But we are building children's brains really. That's what's so rewarding about it."

That perception, Leah feels, is the main blocker to men joining the industry but there are others.

"It is not very well paid," continues Leah, "and men certainly were and probably still are considered the main breadwinners so that doesn't help." On the day I speak to Leah, the Government signed a new deal with the sector to bring in better pay and conditions with pay scales and improvements that acknowledge those working in childcare as professionals that are pivotal to society. It's a start.

"The best way to get more men, or anyone into the sector, is to focus on that perception," says Leah. "This pay deal goes some way to helping

change that, to recognising that what we do is professional education."

"I think parents need to play their part too," she continues. "Some parents are uncomfortable with the idea of a man working in childcare. It's almost like it's a bit weird whereas male primary school teachers you wouldn't really think twice about it."

For Leah the benefits not just to the sector but society as a whole would be huge.

"Men have a different perspective on things and would bring a better balance to the sector," she says. "For little boys growing up to see men as nurturers, talking about emotions, and to have positive male role models is very important. If men aren't considered nurturers or carers that builds up over time and creates a stereotype."

"Things are changing," says Catherine Wickham, "but slowly and we should encourage more boys to consider it. Parents also need to encourage boys to apply for jobs and be open to hiring male caregivers themselves."

## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



Clodagh Finn's six-part series on the women who worked to change Ireland for the better

## Cork-born Quaker who fought for women's rights

WHEN Anna Maria Haslam cast her first vote in 1918, at the age of 90, she was paraded to the polling booth by several jubilant members of the suffrage movement.

Radicals and moderates alike were keen to show their appreciation to this woman, the 16th of 17 children born into a middle-class Quaker family in Youghal, Co Cork, who had spent her life campaigning for women's rights.

The idea of equality had come to her naturally, she said, and she fought for equality for all people.

She opposed slavery, campaigned for education for all and fought for social reform.

Indeed, the scale of her interests is dizzying. She practiced homeopathy, was a member of the Rathmines Lit-

erary Society, wrote campaigning, "forceful" letters to the newspapers and joined a number of social reform groups, from the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to the Fresh Air Society, a body that brought city-centre children to spend a day by the sea or in the fields.

Anna Maria Haslam was also a businesswoman and the family breadwinner. When ill health forced her husband Thomas Haslam to stop working in 1866, she supported both of them - there were no children - by running a small stationery and toy shop from her home in Rathmines, Dublin. Yet, she still found time to campaign for the vote for women and to do so with such vigour that her name was known not only at home, but in England and America.

How did this woman, born into a



Anna M Haslam, with her husband Thomas, in a portrait painted by Sarah Cecilia Harrison in 1908; when ill health forced Thomas to stop working, Anna Maria Haslam became the family's main breadwinner. Picture: Hugh Lane Gallery

busy household in Cork, become such an important figure in the history of Ireland?

It certainly helped that Anna Maria Haslam got a better start than most. While she was the second-last of 17 children born in April 1829 to Jane (née Moor) Fisher, philanthropist and anti-slavery campaigner, and her husband, Abraham, theirs was a relatively affluent household. Abraham Fisher was an insurance agent and miller and, as Quakers, Anna's parents believed girls should have the same right to education as boys.

That meant Anna had access to books. As a young girl she was a

voracious reader who was drawn to such writers as novelist and essayist Maria Edgeworth, and Harriet Martineau, considered the UK's first female sociologist.

She had the privilege of a full education too and attended Quaker boarding schools in Newtown, Co Waterford, and Newgate in York, England.

After her education was complete, she returned to Youghal in 1845 to help her parents run a soup kitchen to help those devastated by the failure of the potato crop.

She also saw a need to do more and, with her sister Deborah, set up a workshop in the family kitchen to

teach young girls to crochet and knit. Soon, the workshop developed into a flourishing business, employing more than 100 local young women.

When she met and later married Thomas Haslam in 1854, she found a kindred spirit. He was a fellow Quaker and supporter of women's rights and when the couple moved to Dublin four years later, they both actively promoted women's suffrage.

While she is best remembered for co-founding the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association with her husband in 1876, she was involved in several social reform movements.

She was a committed champion of women's education and founded the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses and Other Ladies Interested in Education. The title of the organisation might have been a mouthful, but it helped to chip away at attitudes that kept women out of education.

She also fought for the rights of female sex workers. With Belfast journalist and feminist Isabella Tod, she campaigned for the 'Repeal' movement of the day.

They fought to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, initially introduced to control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the British army and navy.

The acts, however, were deeply unfair and imposed a double sexual standard by allowing the arrest and detention of prostitutes who were then subjected to an examination for venereal disease. Men, on the other hand, went free. The acts were finally repealed in 1886.

While Anna Haslam was radical in many senses, she opposed physical force and once labelled women who used it to further their aims as "vociferous vixens".

As the Freeman's Journal put it: "She was in heart and soul a propagandist of the peace-loving, politic school, and nothing did she more cordially detest than the physical-force methods adopted by the extremists of her sex to further their policy."

She was more traditional in other ways too, saying that she was glad to adopt her husband's surname. For instance, she regularly addressed Hanna Sheehy Skeffington as 'Mrs Skeffington.'

Both Hanna and her husband Francis had adopted each other's surnames to make a point, yet Mrs Haslam was not for turning.

POLITICALLY, she differed from many other women in the suffrage movement too as she remained a unionist and a member of the Women's Liberal Unionist Association all her life. She was sure that social reform was more likely within the union than under home rule.

Despite those differences, Anna Haslam was a woman who garnered widespread respect. When she died in 1922, shortly after witnessing the introduction of votes for all women, the Freeman's Journal described her as "one of the most remarkable characters who figured in the public life of Dublin for the last quarter of a century". It added that even those who disagreed with her, "acknowledged her earnestness and sincerity of purpose in all her efforts".

The Irish Independent noted some of those efforts, praising her life-long work aimed at improving the lives of women: "The protection of homeless girls, the health of women workers and kindred problems engaged her earnest attention for many years, and with very profitable results," it said.

A year later, Albert Power sculpted a limestone bench in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, to commemorate Anna and Thomas Haslam. The inscription celebrates their "long years of public service chiefly devoted to the enfranchisement of women".

On the centenary of Anna's death, which was reported on 30 November 1922, we might take a moment to remember her at that bench, or in her birthplace, Youghal.

Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Allison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her history of Ireland in 21 women, *Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is just out in paperback, €14.99.





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# LIFE/STYLE

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# Things I wish I knew before I found a lump in my breast

When **Ann Marie O'Sullivan** was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer, she didn't know what to expect. It's left a legacy, she writes, but it's not all of her

**B**EING diagnosed with cancer thrust me onto an unfamiliar stage. I was told to play a part I didn't understand. I thought I knew the gist of how the play might go. But it turned out, I knew nothing.

When I found a lump in my armpit I was sure it wasn't cancer. It was sore and of all the things I thought I knew about cancer it was that cancerous lumps were never painful. I told myself it would pass and played with it between my fingers, curious but not alarmed.

This was at the beginning of Covid and visiting my doctor wasn't an option. The lump got bigger and I decided to check my breasts not because I expected to find anything, but because I thought I should. I found nothing.

All of Cork had concerns to discuss with the GP, but when I did reach her by phone I admitted that I had been poking this new armpit lump and I suggested that I was the cause of it's soreness. She told me to stop poking it, it was more than likely swollen lymph nodes and without a lump in my breast it wasn't concerning but it would be good to keep an eye.

She asked me to wait and see and ring her back in two weeks. It stayed sore and the discomfort continued to reassure me. "Cancer isn't sore", I told myself any time my mind wandered.

Like any sensible person, I had Googled it. The first few links all said the same thing, cancerous lumps are hard and painless.

But I, and the internet, were wrong. (The oncologist later explained, most cancerous lumps are not painful but some patients do experience pain.)

During those two weeks I checked my breasts more regularly and found a tiny nodule in my left breast. The lump in my breast was a strange discovery. It was smaller than a pea and



Ann Marie O'Sullivan was diagnosed with Stage 3 Her2 positive cancer at the age of 37. Pictures: David Creedon

I couldn't always feel it. Some days, I couldn't find it.

This was another thing I was sure I knew. I decided I couldn't always find it because my breast tissue was just changing in density or texture with my cycle. This too was wrong. Changes in breast tissue don't feel like this solid hard lump I had found. I know this now.

Still, I was worried enough to call her back and make an appointment. On the day I went to her I considered putting one of my daughter's stickers on it. It was so elusive I worried I wouldn't be able to show her. She found it and referred me on.

The registrar oncologist took three attempts to find it under my direction. It was miniscule. But it was there. The cancer had started in my breast and had spread to my armpit where the cells were dividing further. He drew around it the pea shape with a marker, and around the large lump under my arm before I was given a mammogram and ultrasound where they discovered another lump further back. Six biopsies were then taken from

my breast and armpit while I asked when I would get a phone call. The appointment leaflet had reassuringly said most people only visit once and if needed, they get a phone call when the results are clear. I had no reason to think I wasn't most people. In fact, even before my appointment I set myself up as an armchair oncologist and started researching how at risk I really was.

Being female is a risk. I conceded that I was a female. There is an increased risk for women over 50. I was 37. This was going well. Obesity was a risk factor, I calculated my BMI online and I was within "normal" range. Alcohol consumption increases risk, I rarely drink. I also don't have any genetic disposition to cancer. These were all ticks in the "unlikely to have cancer" box.

I saw the risk factors as a prescriptive list of who got to play the part of cancer patient and who didn't. Despite the slow dawning of the possibility that I had cancer, I told myself it couldn't happen to me. At times I had myself convinced. But I was wrong. But still I asked about this phone

call to confirm I was in the clear and when it might come. With droll surprise I was told that anyone with six biopsies taken would be brought back into the clinic regardless of Covid restrictions. I nodded, feeling like I should know what that meant.

At that moment, I wanted to ask: "Do you already know that I have cancer? Is that why you are so sure



Ann Marie O'Sullivan and her husband Stephen Fewer at home in Cork.

I'll be back here?" But that was too much to produce in the moment. Hospitals move quickly and during the pandemic everyone was trying to get out of the room as quickly as possible.

Later I learned to ask: "What did you mean by that?" and it's still one of the most useful tools I have. It means I don't have to decode what I thought they were saying and turn that around into a question. Instead I can just ask them to be clearer. I learnt to always ask because anything that worries me during an appointment will replay endlessly for me at home.

He was right, I was brought back. Once I was diagnosed the full house lights came up on all I didn't know. I was centre stage without a clue.

I thought breast cancer was one thing, and that you had this one thing or you didn't. But there are huge differences within breast cancers. There are stages to breast cancer from 0-4, breast cancer can metastasize, there are different types of breast cancer and the different types result in a variety of treatment options.

Despite the slow dawning of the possibility that I had cancer, I told myself it couldn't happen to me

I had Stage 3 Her2 positive breast cancer treated with neoadjuvant chemotherapy, surgery, and radiotherapy.

Out of all the scene changes I wasn't expecting, or the dialogue I struggled to understand, the part I never anticipated was that I could feel this well again.

It didn't seem possible that I could become someone who had cancer and doesn't think about it every day. Since being diagnosed I've heard of women who had cancer 10, 15, 20 years ago and carry on living healthy lives. I didn't know they existed and I wish I had.

Having seen cancer represented on television, by hearing distant stories of it, I thought I knew what it was and how it ended. It's not possible or desirable to know everything about breast cancer. People's experiences of it and their outcomes are hugely varied. There are millions living beyond cancer and I wish I had understood that that was true.

A time came when I was told treatment was a success, people stopped directing me around the stage and everything grew still again. I remain unsure of what will happen next, but I've stepped off the stage and feel like myself again. Cancer was part of me, it's definitely left a legacy, but it's not all of me.

For now, I look forward to my next role because I've a feeling the best is yet to come.

■ If you have any concerns regarding a lump in your breast or armpit, or any other changes in your breasts — such as the nipple turning inwards, dimpled skin, an enlarged breast or nipple discharge, always consult your GP.

■ Details of the eight signs of breast cancer are available at [breastcancerireland.com](http://breastcancerireland.com)

■ If you would like more information on breast screening, breast cancer, it's causes and treatments and a guide on how to check your breasts visit [www2.hse.ie/breast/](http://www2.hse.ie/breast/)

## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



In the second part of a six-part series, **Clodagh Finn** recalls Margaret MacCurtain, feminist, historian, Dominican sister – and troublemaker

# A pioneer who wrote women back into history

**I**T ISN'T very often that a single person can be described with such an unlikely collection of adjectives: social reformer, student of Lord of the Rings author JRR Tolkien, troublemaker and Dominican sister.

All of those apply to Cork-born Margaret MacCurtain, yet they don't even scratch the surface of her enduring legacy as a pioneer who wrote Irish women back into history.

She did so, against all the odds. In 1964, for instance, Archbishop John Charles McQuaid asked to see her notes on the counter-reformation while she was lecturing in history at University College Dublin (UCD), but she refused to hand them over.

And when Catherine Rose, the vi-

sionary founder of Arlen House, published *Women in Irish Society: the Historical Dimension* in 1978, she was told there was no market for women's history.

After the book – a collection of essays Margaret co-edited with Donnchadh Ó Corráin – sold over 10,000 copies, the naysayers had to eat humble pie.

Later Margaret said: "My determination to write women into mainstream history, though resisted for years, has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams."

On the second anniversary of her death last Wednesday, Alan Hayes, who is now at the helm of Arlen House, paid tribute to a woman who acted as a foundation stone of Ire-



land's fight for equality, justice, diversity and human rights. She was, he wrote, "a lifelong feminist, brave activist, pioneering educator, lone crusader, progressive citizen [and] troublemaker".

She was one of the few members of the Irish religious community to campaign for a 'yes' vote in the 1995 referendum on divorce.

She also campaigned for the recognition of gay rights and supported the use of contraception. But, as former colleague Mary O'Dowd, professor Emerita in History at Queen's University Belfast,

points out, she was not defying the Catholic authorities, rather pointing towards a more informed and open-minded approach that would fulfil the vision laid out in the second Vatican Council.

She had a deep faith, yet her family was surprised when she decided to enter the Dominican order after graduating from University College Cork with a first-class honours degree in English, history and Irish. She was a natural scholar, winning a gold medal and the Peel Memorial Award.

She was born in 1929 in Cork into a

**Margaret MacCurtain in 1978; her vocation did not stop her penchant for often radical stances on social issues.** Picture: courtesy of Alan Hayes, Arlen House

family where her mother, Ann McKenna, a banker, and her father, Sean MacCurtain, a school inspector, put an emphasis on equality and education. All four of their daughters went to university.

Her external examiner JRR Tolkien, the famous author of *The Lord of the Rings*, hoped she would continue her university career and invited her to study medieval literature in Oxford with him, but she chose a different path.

**S**HE said later that she had been open to the idea of becoming a nun from an early age. When, aged nine, she contracted diphtheria and spent months in a fever hospital in Listowel, Co Kerry, without visitors, her faith deepened: "My thoughts turned to God, especially when one of my companions in that bleak ward died."

Her work as a nun, however, did not stop her becoming a "troublemaker" or, more accurately, a committed supporter of social reform and change. She said academia needed a "good shake-up" and she supported a wide range of causes, from women's rights and the campaign to end corporal punishment in schools to the anti-apartheid movement.

In 1978, she joined some 20,000 people on a street protest to try – unsuccessfully as it turned out – to stop civic offices being built on the remains of an exceptional Viking settlement at Wood Quay in Dublin city.

"I find myself always in the stream of controversy, in interesting ways," she once said.

As Sr Benvenuta – Sr Ben to her students at UCD – she continued her studies, completing a first-class master's and later PhD on the 16th-century Kerry-born bishop/diplomat Daniel O'Daly.

She travelled to several European archives and became aware of the pivotal, but ignored, role played by women, setting the course for her pioneering work on women's history. She also used her expertise to show

that there had been powerful women in the early Irish church. She would have been pleased to know that St Brigid's feast day on February 1 is to become a national holiday from next year. She presented the early saint as a woman with real agency; a monastery founder with considerable ecclesiastical influence.

Margaret MacCurtain was also an educationalist who wanted to offer opportunities to as many people as possible.

In 1980, she took time out from university teaching to set up the Senior College in Ballyfermot, Dublin, so that students from disadvantaged areas might have access to education. Four of its graduates went on to be nominated for Oscars in film animation in 2016. That happy fact was recorded in the *Irish Times* under a headline that read: "Oscars for art of the possible".

Margaret MacCurtain was a woman who saw possibilities, and pursued them.

As her friend and publisher Alan Hayes said of her: "She was the kind of person who made it her life's mission to help as many people as possible. She treated presidents the same as she did plumbers. And I think they all realised they had met someone truly great, who offered them a glimpse of a better world."

The legacy of that better world lives on in so many ways.

The Women's History Association of Ireland, founded with Mary Cullen, is just one example.

Another, the annual Margaret MacCurtain Scholarship in Women's History, contains within it a delicious irony because it is offered at the School of History at UCD, the very university which once ignored her calls to tell the stories of women from our past.

■ Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Allison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her *History of Ireland in 21 Women, Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is just out in paperback, €14.99.





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# LIFE/STYLE

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# Menopause: change the narrative

Lorraine Keane wasn't exactly chuffed when she was approached to front a campaign about menopause health. She had noticed her body slowing down, experiencing symptoms she automatically put down to stress and tiredness, never once considering it could be perimenopause.

"I was getting up in the middle of the night, probably three to five times and then it would take me ages to get back asleep. My mind would be racing," she explains.

Lorraine would wake up the next day feeling really tired, sluggish, and irritable. She had almost no interest in sex.

"I was low and in bad form with absolutely no libido. I also had joint pain, restless legs, sore muscles, nerve pain, and itchy skin. Occasionally, I would have night sweats."

As someone who has always taken pride in her appearance, Lorraine baulked when she started getting brittle nails, adult acne, and thinning hair.

She tried the Cleanmarine Meno-Min supplements and started to notice results quite quickly. Taking them was one thing but being the face of a menopause brand felt like career suicide to Lorraine, who had recently become self-employed.

"They wanted to call the campaign Let's Talk Menopause and I said 'please guys — I'm in a really ageist industry.' Menopause just wasn't a sexy subject."

The more she thought about it, the more the guilt crept in. She knew she could use her voice to help other women, even if meant a slight bruise to the ego. She asked her husband Peter for advice.

"Immediately he said, 'you're always talking about women supporting women, and you have been suffering.' He noticed that I was so much better and said 'I think it'd be great'."

Lorraine still felt reticent and she approached her dad, knowing he had traditional values, asking him if he would mind. His voice steered a little bit on the phone as he told her what he thought.

"He said: 'Laurie, I'm so proud of you. Your mum went through it and it was a very tough time. I didn't know what to do. I wish I could have been a better support. So, for men, it's so important that you go out and talk.'"

Lorraine began hosting the podcast, *Let's Talk Hormone Health* in conjunction with consultant endocrinologist, Dr Mary Ryan. Once coronavirus restrictions began to lift, they toured the country, offering educational workshops for women.

She feels that it's essential to start educating girls at a young age, and she notices that her daughter Amelia is very comfortable telling her boyfriend when she has her period.

"I changed the narrative. I want there to be less shame. I used to hide the fact that I was going for naps. I don't do that anymore. I am so ready

To mark International Menopause Day, Mary Cate Smith talks to Lorraine Keane about sex drive, guilt, and how we need change to happen on a grand scale when it comes to women's health



Lorraine Keane and Dr Mary Ryan: For decades, women have suffered symptoms in silence but this cannot be the case anymore.

for menopause."

Has she made many adjustments to her lifestyle? She is conscious of her diet from Monday to Thursday, she says, watching her carbohydrate, sugar, and dairy intake.

Another piece of invaluable information that Lorraine learned from Dr Ryan was that women over 40 shouldn't be running long distances. As a long-time running refusenik, my ears perk up.

"Dr Mary Ryan always says slow down and plug yourself in — you need to recharge. If you do heavy exercise after 40, you're putting so much pressure on the pituitary gland and your hormone balance is completely shot."

"What we should be doing is 20-minute weight resistance classes — high intensity but not high cardio sessions."

Consultant endocrinologist and physician, Dr Mary Ryan is passion-

ate about disseminating the right information to women on their menopause journey. Hormones control so many systems in the body, says Dr Ryan, from your heart muscle to your bowel function, blood pressure, the nervous system, and more. They're also the reason for experiencing feelings — they're "the reason we fall in love," says Dr Ryan.

"To work normally and optimally, the master control centre, the pituitary gland, has to be well recharged. Hormones work in a lovely circadian rhythm. And the reason it's so significant in women is that in puberty, women produce two hormones called FSH [follicle-stimulating hormone] and LH [Luteinising hormone] that prompt the ovaries to produce oestrogen and prepare the body for a period."

Societal gaslighting is a problem, says Dr Ryan, as women's symptoms were often dismissed as psychoso-

matic. "For too long, if a woman was irritable or got tired mid-cycle or emotional before a period, it was always passed off as it was 'in their head' and of course, we know it's not," she says.

The flux of hormones at different times of a cycle can disrupt women's physical and mental health, and it needs to be tackled with respect and scientific understanding.

Hormone imbalance can affect your gut function, says Dr Ryan. "The gut and microbiome are critical — 98% of our happy hormone, serotonin, is produced in the gut and is very important in controlling the immune system."

Change is afoot but it needs to happen on a grand scale, explains Dr Ryan.

"Women and society need to allow for that. If women are emotional, it's not that they're making it up." While the topic of menopause has

seen increased visibility of late, what about perimenopause? "Perimenopause is when the eggs are starting to deplete. Usually, that's at the age of 45 to 50 but often it can be before that," says Dr Ryan.

The fluctuating hormones can cause irritability, sleeplessness, flushing, brain fog, and joint pain.

There are some restrictions with HRT, says Dr Ryan, but not to fret — there are several other options available, should you need intervention. Transdermal and micronised, progesterone gels can be used and these options have proven favourable in terms of not causing blood clots, says Dr Ryan.

"With families who have a history with breast cancer, it's really about what's safe for people."

The shortages in HRT needs to be resolved, says Dr Ryan and it is one of the main reasons she went on Insta-

gram — so she could voice her concerns in a public forum.

"I wanted to throw a bit of weight behind [the HRT shortage] and get people out to rally because we all together, we have a huge voice."

Menopause doesn't discriminate and recently Dr Ryan saw a patient who went from being a self-confident assertive executive to being extremely anxious and loathe to leave the house.

"Once we treated her, she came in hugging me and saying 'thank you so much, my life is back'."

Women's health has been left "in the doldrums" for years, says Dr Ryan.

"The positive thing about education and the Joe Duffy Show is that women now know what the previous generations didn't. They suffered in silence. I hear the stories. Some of these women were wrongly put in institutions and never come out."

At the age of 36, Sallyanne Brady had been experiencing low mood, accompanied by frequent bouts of anxiety, panic attacks, and intrusive thoughts. Her symptoms were so severe that she experienced suicidal ideation.

"Most women think they're going mad. Go back in history to when women started outliving their ovaries and you see a pattern of women being institutionalised in asylums. The word 'hysterectomy' comes from hysteria. We have a very dark history when it comes to the menopause."

When Sallyanne's period stopped and she was eventually diagnosed with menopause, her doctor prescribed HRT, the hormonal replacement drug which she describes as "life-changing".

While this brought about such positive change, it also highlighted the paucity in information. She vowed to dedicate her life to signal posting evidence-based medical information to her contemporaries. She particularly wanted to provide information about perimenopause which she felt was so shrouded in mystery, it belied its very existence.

"It's sneaky and insidious. Women, including myself, are vulnerable. We'd do anything to feel less miserable."

She started with a private Facebook page with Claire Peel in 2019 which has grown to over 44,000 members. Armed with information, she positioned herself as a menopause mentor and has built a community where women could support each other through these symptoms.

"How many women have we lost as a result of this one thing that's easily fixed? How many other women have been on the edge like I have — because I was suicidal in my journey?"

With women like these at the forefront of menopause education, the stigma of talking about hormone health is slowly, but surely, lifting.

## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



Clodagh Finn recalls Eileen Costello, school principal, music archivist, activist, and senator

## From humble workhouse birth to seat in Seanad

There are many reasons to celebrate the life and lasting legacy of Eileen Costello. She was a senator, school principal, women's rights activist and a pioneering collector of music "who did for folk music what Lady Gregory had done for folktales", to quote one newspaper report of 1923.

But it is the evidence pointing to her birth, very probably in a workhouse in London, that makes the story of this singular woman all the more remarkable. She was born Edith Drury in London on 27 June 1870. Although little is known of her early life, her daughter, Nuala, once said that her father was a native of Co Limerick and her mother was Welsh. The only Edith Drury who was born in London on that date, and who

has a birth certificate, was a daughter born to Michael Drury and his wife Agnes Hopton in the Strand Union Workhouse, Cleveland Street, St Pancras, London, according to historians and biographers Máire Ní Mhurchú and Diarmuid Breathnach.

Most accounts of her early life give scant details but suggest that some kind of charitable organisation helped her get an education and qualify as a teacher.

It says something about her ability and determination that she quickly went on to become principal at St Michael's Church of England School in London.

At the same time, she was nurturing a deep interest in Irish culture prompted, perhaps, by her Irish roots. In 1896, she went to the first meet-



Senator Eileen Costello (right) arriving at Leinster House in December 1922 with fellow senator, Alice Stopford Green, two of four women senators serving in the Seanad at the time. Picture: Bibliothèque Nationale de France

ing of the London branch of the Gaelic League and, two years later, was the only woman elected to its branch committee.

She joined the city's Irish Literary Society, too, and got to know Lily (Susan) and Lolly (Elizabeth) Yeats, sisters of poet WB Yeats who were doing important work in the Celtic Revival at Cuala Press.

By then, Edith Drury, as she was still known, was already collecting songs. There's an evocative reference to her transcribing the song, Neillí Bán, from colleague Michael Breathnach as the pair caught the train home from Woolwich where they had

been setting up a branch of the Gaelic League.

In 1902, she represented the London branch at the Conradh Ard Fheis in Dublin and stayed on to help organise an open-air festival on the Aran Islands (Inis Meáin).

She would go on to help shape a new Ireland, but it is also true to say that new country shaped her.

Around this time, she converted to Catholicism, even though it meant having to resign her teaching position in London. She adopted the Irish name Eibhlín and, a year later, married a Galway doctor, Thomas Bodkin Costello, and moved to Tuam.

Over the next decade, she continued her involvement in education, teaching at the Presentation convent in Tuam and helping to found Conaláiste Connacht in Spiddal, Galway, in 1905. Meantime, she accompanied her husband on his rounds and, as she put it, "discovered a rich field of song, practically untouched but in imminent danger of being lost through indifference and neglect".

She put what she collected into the ground-breaking compilation, *Amhráin Muighe Seola*, which was widely praised when it appeared in 1923.

The *Evening Telegraph* paid an enthusiastic, if patronising, tribute recognising the many families whose songs were recorded, including the Hession family, "the best-known folk-singers of the district".

The article was gushing in its praise of the songs themselves: "They are exquisite words, set to sobbing, wild music. The verses are an lullaby of the West... Yet this wonderful part of the nation's heritage was in danger of being lost in the flood of Jazz and music hall inanities which America has set loose even on this 'primitive' west country, through the medium of the gramophone. Its people may be primitive in the eyes of these moderns."

"But they refer in their verse, and even their casual conversation, to the heroes, not only of their own land, but of Greece and Rome."

Dr Costello, Eileen's husband, also used his widespread practice to study and preserve archaeological artefacts, local history and folklore. In the 1950s, the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society Journal referred to his consulting rooms as "the most important archaeological information bureau and clearing-house in the West".

If Eileen Costello was keen on preserving the past, she also wanted to help create a better future.

She was the first woman district councillor in north Galway when she was elected for Sinn Féin in the 1920 local elections. During the War of Independence, she hid volunteers on the run in her own home which was often raided by Black and Tans.

When the first Free State Senate was established in 1922, she was

elected as a Cumann na nGaedheal senator, one of four female senators. The other three were historian and author Alice Stopford Green, nationalist and suffragist Jennie Wyse Power and philanthropist, theatre-founder and cattle-breeder (president Irish Dairy Shorthorn Breeders' Association) Ellen Cuffe, Countess of Desart.

In the Seanad, Eileen Costello and Jennie Wyse Power opposed the Civil Service Regulation Bill, 1925, which proposed confining women to lower grades in the civil service. It was defeated in the Seanad which delayed its enactment by a year.

They also forced an amendment to the Juries Bill (1927) which had sought to exclude women from juries.

"Women," Senator Costello said, "were still to be subject to the obligations of citizenship, but their privileges were to be curtailed and restricted."

While she was anti-divorce (at least in 1928), she campaigned to help unmarried mothers avoid mother and baby institutions by seeking financial aid from the fathers of their children.

She lost her seat in 1934, but continued to be active in public life. During the Second World War, then in her 70s, she organised Red Cross services in her region. She was also one of the founder members of Tuam's Irish Countrywomen's Association.

When she died in 1962, the Tuam Herald claimed her as the town's "first lady". "Every local cause, charitable or cultural, found in her a ready supporter, and just as her husband was the town's 'grand old man,' so was she its first lady."

Several years later, in 2021, that same paper recalled her contribution, paying tribute to Eileen Costello, "a woman who dared".

Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Allison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her history of Ireland in 21 women, *Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is just out in paperback, €14.99.





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# LIFE/STYLE

Tuesday, 25 October, 2022

**T**HE tradition of what we now call Halloween is as ancient as the ceremonial hill sites that raged for centuries with bonfires and still dot our mysterious landscape today. But just how Irish is today's modern celebration and how much can we claim as our own?

"At its heart, Halloween is an Irish feast," says author Manchán Magan. "The ancient Irish festival, Samhain, is the basis of modern Halloween. Samhain meant the end of the harvest. It marked the start of winter and was the beginning of a period of darkness, with the sun weakening and spending more time in the underworld. It was thought to be the time of the year when the threshold between worlds was thinnest and that gave creatures from the underworld the chance to access our world more easily."

Often these ghosts, ghouls and fairies would venture through the fields and country roads of Ireland in search of food and unsuspecting victims to take back to the underworld as souvenirs. "The reason we disguise ourselves as the dead or evil spirits," says Manchán, "is so we can head out into the night, roaming the roads, safe in the knowledge that if we bump into a being from the dark side, they'll think we're one of them and walk on by."

"It was a good idea to appease these spirits with food, which is why you can still turn up as a ghost on any doorstep in Ireland at Halloween and be offered sweets and nuts. We exported the practice to North America and it spread from there."

"Traditions are always changing but many of them still have the essence of Samhain," says Jenny Butler, lecturer in the School of Religions at University College Cork. "Many people think that trick or treating is an American thing, but most of the seasonal festivals in Ireland had this feature. Imbolc, which became St Brigid's Day, had a tradition of going door to door with an effigy and asking for food, mainly dairy products. Bealtaine the same and it included lighting bonfires."

Butler points out that many of the practices that went to the US came back to us with amendments. One example is the scary, illuminated pumpkin we see in dark doorways and windows around this time of the year. When the Irish emigrated in vast numbers across the Atlantic, they brought their traditions with them. One of those was the carving of scary faces in whatever vegetables were locally available.

In Ireland, it was often a turnip, but as pumpkins were more freely available and, let's face it, easier to carve, they became the vegetable of choice for Jack-o-lanterns in the US. They subsequently made their way back here to become integral to our own Halloween tradition.

The increased calorie count and reduction in monkey nuts and fruit in trick-or-treat bags is also widely put down to US influence. Adult parties are another curious take on the modern feast.

"I'm a fan of Halloween," says Butler. "I like anything to do with the carnivalesque, dressing up, and playing with imagery. Halloween is for everyone. If you go back further it was a communal thing. What we know of it from archival collections is that adults played tricks and pranks

# How Irish is Halloween?

At its heart, Halloween is an Irish feast, though the modern iteration as we know has taken various influences from Scotland to the USA, writes **Jonathan deBurca Butler**



and got involved just as much as children."

As much as we'd like to think Halloween is as exclusive to us as Barack Obama, its roots as an ancient Celtic festival means Samhain took on its own Scottish and Welsh twists. Indeed, the Scots can claim the very name Halloween. As is often the case, when Christianity came to town, it appropriated pre-existing pagan festivals. All Hallows' Day, the day when all Christian saints and martyrs are celebrated, was shunted into Samhain and was thus preceded by All Hallows' Eve, or Evening, which in Scots was shortened to ee'n.

Some Scots traditions, though similar to our own, have their own unique takes. Instead of biting out of apples dangled from a ceiling, for example, our Celtic cousins take chunks out of messy, treacle-covered scones and burn nuts to predict the future of their relationships.

While this amorous nut burning was also found in Ireland, today we look to the traditional barmbrack for portents of our romantic future.

"Again it all goes back to this weakness in the space-time continuum," says Manchán. "The proximity



Dr Jenny Butler: Traditions always change but many still have essence of Samhain.



Manchán Magan: Good idea to appease the spirits with food.

of the two worlds in this period was why games and traditions around prophecy were so common. So finding the ring in the barmbrack foretold that the person would marry. Finding a dried bean prophesied a single life, and finding a stick meant ending up in an unhappy marriage. These were messages from the future."

Fireworks, a more recent, and,

many argue, irritating addition to the celebrations, are part of an English tradition based on Guy Fawkes Night. So although we have always had bonfires, fireworks are a decidedly modern addition.

Though Halloween has been through several cultural cycles, its core traits are rooted in Ireland and its neighbouring countries.

"I think Halloween allows us to ex-

## SPOOKTACULAR FAMILY FUN

Make your way to Leahy's Farm for their Boo Experience. Take the Haunted Hay Ride and help the local witch make up some potions.  
■ leahysopenfarm.ie/boo-experience/

Cackling Witch, Petrifying Pumpkin, or Laughing Vampire, among others  
■ toysoldierfactory.checkfront.com/reserve/

The good people at Greywood Arts in Killeagh are offering three willow lantern making workshops over the mid-term which you can then use in a Halloween parade on November 5.  
■ greywoodarts.org/upcoming-events/

Castlecormer Discovery Park has several events running over the mid-term including a Bug's Life - Family Friendly Trail and a Family Foraging Trail  
■ discoverypark.ie/halloween-discoverypark/

How about a BOO-WOW Halloween with your pooch? Top Barkz Cork hosts a Trick 'n Treat puppy and dog party on October 29&30. Learn a new trick or try your paw at dog agility.  
■ facebook.com/Topbarkz/cork/

press and explore something that we are not normally allowed to," says Butler. "Whether that's appearing in a frightening way by dressing up or behaving in a way that is not normally socially acceptable. We can ex-

perience the spiritual world and think about the dead. It's not really something we do in everyday life."  
■ Manchán Magan's latest book *Listen to the Land Speak*, published by Gill Books, is out now

## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



**Clodagh Finn** recalls a woman who campaigned for widows' rights, set up the first Citizens' Advice Bureau in Cork, and supported the introduction of free legal aid in civil cases

# Cork champion of the underdog

**W**HEN Maureen Curtis Black died on January 18, 1999, six women carried her coffin as a mark of respect for a pioneer who campaigned all of her life to give ordinary people a voice. One of those pallbearers, historian Sandra McAvoy, recalls: "I think we were all so proud to make that final statement: To say that final thank you for her long fight, for her friendship, for her unflinching personal support to so many people; and we were saying, Maureen, we revere you."

Her long commitment to equality meant she was held in high esteem by many. She campaigned for widows' rights, founded the first Citizens' Advice Bureau, in Cork, and offered vital support to fellow Corkwoman Josie Airey during her seven-year fight to secure free legal aid in civil cases in Ireland. Black also fought for social reform and, although a devout

Catholic, warned that writing an amendment into the Constitution which put women and the unborn on an equal footing would put women's health at risk.

"But then," as she wrote in a hard-hitting piece in this paper in 1983, "it is only women who are at risk — and women, especially married women, don't count in Ireland."

Her long fight and constant focus on institutional and legislative inequality meant she had her detractors. A 1976 newspaper profile noted while she was nothing short of a saviour to some, to others, she was a nuisance and an agitator who demanded answers to awkward questions.

One of the awkward questions she asked, again and again, was why widows were treated so poorly. The extent of widows' difficulties became clear when thousands flocked to the mass meetings Black organised in the late 1960s.



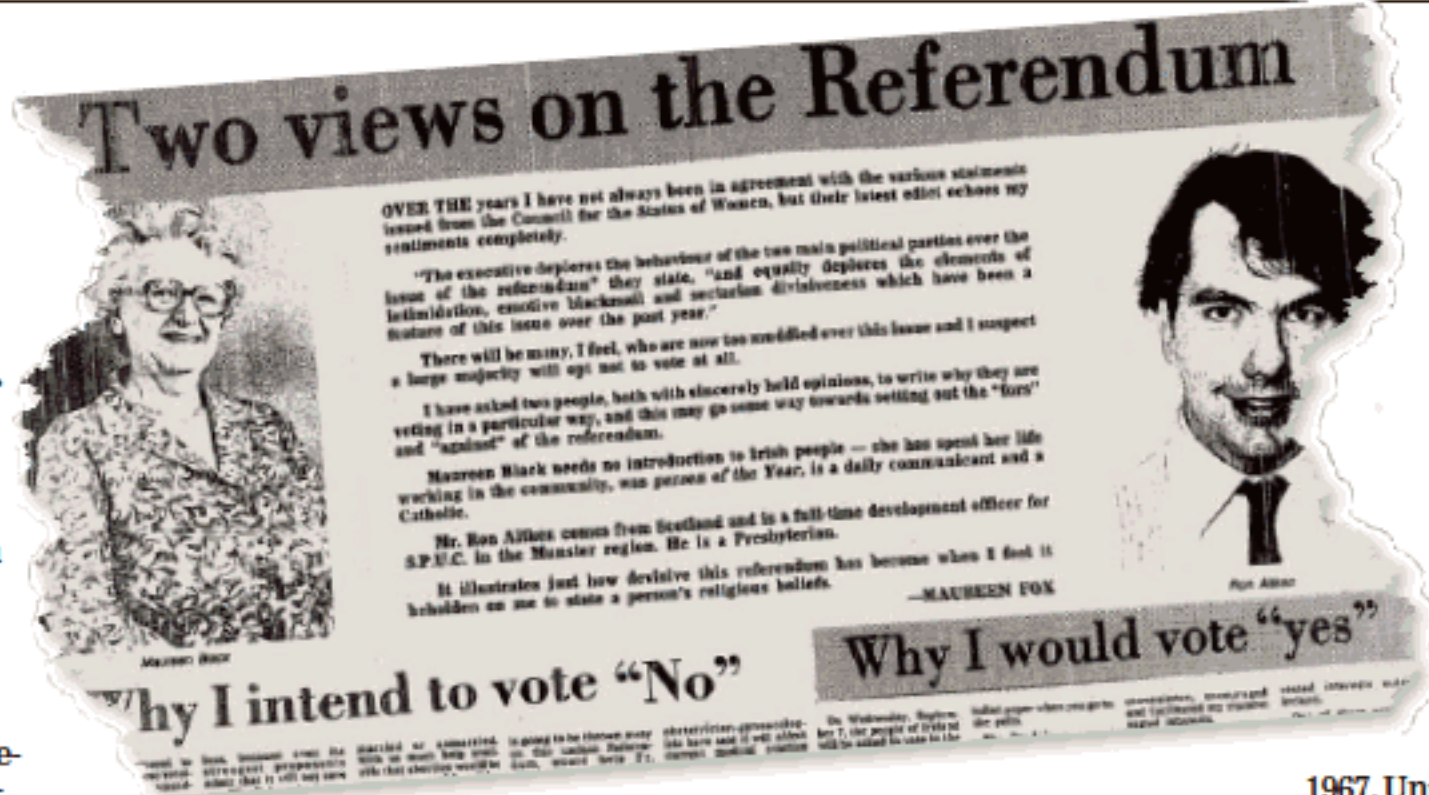
At the time, a widow with five children was entitled to an allowance that was a little less than the weekly wages of a 15-year-old junior postman.

As a widow herself — husband Jack died when her son Brian was still an infant — the issue had personal resonance and, in 1969, Black set up the Cork Widows' Association.

Another problem soon became apparent: The impenetrable layer of bureaucracy that kept a widow from her small pension. McAvoy explains: "The department might take months to reply to simple queries regarding pension rights and often the only way to make progress was to approach local TDs. An advice centre was set up... and women were urged to take their problems to the top, to the taoiseach if necessary."

The foundations for the first Citizens' Advice Bureau had been laid. It opened its doors in Cork in

**Maureen Curtis Black: Her long fight and commitment to equality meant she was held in high esteem by many. Right: the hard-hitting piece she wrote for this newspaper before the 1983 referendum on the Eighth Amendment.**



1972 and, within a short period of time, was dealing with thousands of queries a year.

Maureen Curtis Black was born in Cork's Grand Parade into a family "well-known in local politics, music, and sport", as she described it in her own literature when she stood as an independent candidate in the 1977 election, securing 1,525 first-preference votes.

"Father: Pat Curtis, c. 30 years on Corporation, twice Lord Mayor Elect of Cork," she continued. "Uncle: Prof. 'Tonny' Curtis taught music in all boys schools in Cork; cousin Bernard Curtis, 40 years Director School of Music. Brother: Brian 'Pogo' Curtis, three international caps swimming, hockey, cricket, rugby Dolphin senior team."

Black herself went to University College Cork (UCC) and graduated with an honours degree in French and English in 1933. She later qualified as a teacher and went to England to find work where she taught modern languages (French, German and Spanish) for many years.

She met her husband Jack in Sheffield and their son Brian was born there.

Then, the unthinkable happened and she found herself widowed with a young baby. In the years that followed, she chose posts that she thought would give her child the best start in life.

"She took a teaching post in West-cliff-on-Sea because she felt that the seaside would be an ideal place for a toddler," says McAvoy.

Later, Black moved to Leicester so her son could attend his late father's school and, in 1965, she moved back to her native Cork when he enrolled at UCC.

By then, she was 51 and had "retired", although her work here was only beginning.

"When she returned to Ireland in the '60s, she saw with fresh eyes the difficulties facing individuals, groups and societies... and she was not intimidated by the system, nor by any organisation or individual," former professor of zoology Maire Mulcahy said in one of many tributes after Black's death.

The experience she had gained outside of Ireland meant Black knew things could be done differently and she used her "needle-sharp mind" to bring about change, says McAvoy.

While Black later said she considered her work in developing the Citizens' Advice Bureau as the most important, she was active in many other areas. She was interested in the environment and was chair of the Cork Amenity Council for two years.

She was president of the Cork Federation of Women's Organisations and, in interviews, made a point of outlining the legislation that had made women "second-class citizens" in Ireland.

It was summed up pithily in one 1990 interview: "Until 1957 a married woman was a 'child in law' — ranked with infants and the insane — and her husband's chattel. She had no rights in the guardianship of her children until 1964, no right to inherit any part of her husband's estate until

1967. Until 1973 there was a ban on her remaining in State employment after marriage."

Black was also keenly interested in education. She was national secretary of the Irish Federation of University Women and ran for chancellorship of the National University in 1977. She was runner-up in a tight election.

She pushed another boundary when, in 1993, she became the first Corkwoman to be awarded the freedom of her native city.

The council listed many of her achievements in its citation; proof that she was a woman who "did not live life to the full, but to overflowing", to quote Prof Mulcahy.

It is hard to cover all of her titles and many honours, but journalist Maureen Black perhaps best captured her legacy when she wrote: "Maureen Black was the one who always fought for the underdog, she was unafraid, outspoken and determined on their behalf — and this work she did can never be quantified."

■ Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Alison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her history of Ireland in 21 women, *Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is just out in paperback, €14.99.





Editor: Esther N  
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# LIFE/STYLE

Tuesday, 1 November, 2022

## 12 gifts going for under €50

Christmas isn't that far away and it's never too early to start planning. Here are some ideas compiled by **Denise O'Donoghue**



1

**1. Curl Up & Cuddle gift box from McNutt of Donegal, €50**

The box includes a McNutt of Donegal throw (available in two colours), a pack of Mella's Irish butter fudge, and an Irish-made gift card. ■ [mcnuttofdonegal.com](http://mcnuttofdonegal.com)

**2. The Dulleog Collection Earring from Siobhán Daly Designs, €29.99**

These versatile earrings are individually handcrafted in Meath with genuine leather in bold, strong colours and textures, in contemporary designs by Kilkenny designer Siobhán Daly. ■ [siobhandalydesigns.com](http://siobhandalydesigns.com)

**3. Fragrance Discovery Candle Set from the Handmade Soap Company, €35**

Three of the brand's most popular fragrances presented in a sustainable gift box and miniature glass containers. It includes lemongrass, lavender, and grapefruit scents. ■ [thehandmadesoapcompany.ie](http://thehandmadesoapcompany.ie)

**4. Giftbox service from Halfway up the Stairs Children's Bookshop, from €30**

This gift box service starts from €30. Staff personally choose a selection of books for children of all ages which are wrapped in eco-friendly and attractive packaging. ■ [halfwayupthestairs.ie](http://halfwayupthestairs.ie)

**5. SMART Vulcan USB rechargeable light set from The Bike Shed, €45**

Keep your loved ones safe on the road and happy on Christmas morning. Win win. ■ [thebikeshed.ie](http://thebikeshed.ie)

**6. Sleep pillow spray stocking gift from GROUND Wellbeing, €10**

Every Irish mammy says all they want for Christmas is a rest, and this is a great way to answer their wishes. The 10ml Sleep Pillow Spray from GROUND is a lovely stocking filler. ■ [groundwellbeing.com](http://groundwellbeing.com)

**7. Fastnet Rock & Lighthouse from SIAR Photography (framed), €40**

SIAR's Landmark Collection offers stunning shots of well-known locations, landscapes, and seascapes from around the country. ■ [siarphotography.ie](http://siarphotography.ie)

**8. Hurling socks from Irish Socksociety, €9**

Want the perfect stocking-filler for a hurling-mad someone? They'll wear these socks with pride. ■ [Irishsocksociety.com](http://Irishsocksociety.com)

**9. 2023 diary, Badly Made Books, €25**

Don't be fooled by the Kerry beach on the cover. These A5 diaries are made in Cork and are made from 85% recycled ingredients. ■ [badlymadebooks.com](http://badlymadebooks.com)

**10. Paw Print Rubber Stamp by Heirloom Seals, €17**

This paw print rubber stamp features an exact replica of your pet's paw print to put a 'pets' pawtograph' on Christmas cards, dog tags, cat tags, or use fabric ink to add to their clothing. ■ [heirloomseals.com](http://heirloomseals.com)

**11. Winter Collection large candle, from FieldDay, €20.95**

You can't go wrong with a candle. The rich cinnamon, clove and orange fragrances are the perfect winter scent and will ensure a Christmassy feeling in your home. ■ [fielddayireland.ie](http://fielddayireland.ie)

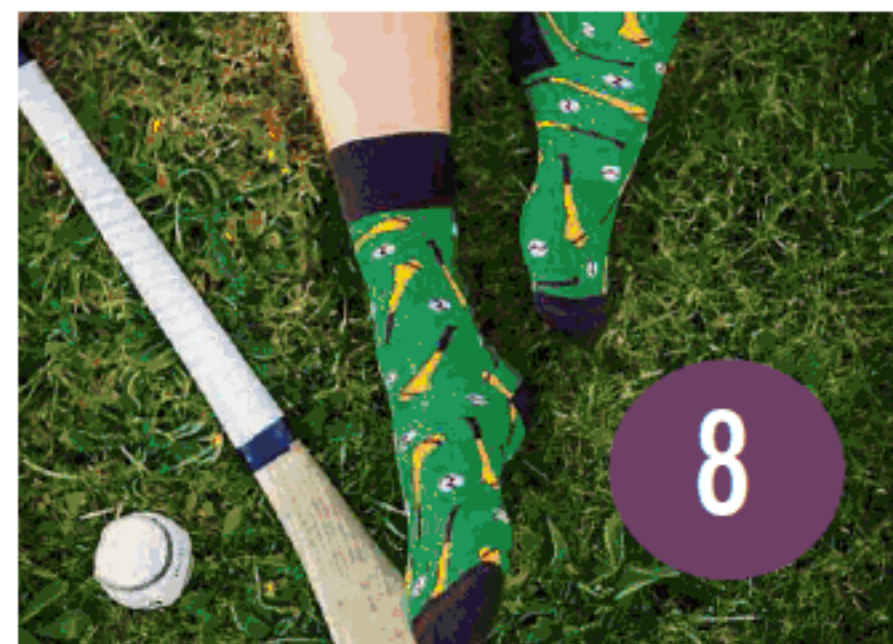
**12. Yay! Happy Days Gift Box from Faerly, €25**

Each box contains a hand-poured Christmas candle, handmade seasonal soap, hot chocolate melting spoon, box of chocolate bark shards and a pack of Irish native wildflower seed bombs. ■ [Faerly.ie](http://Faerly.ie)

**See Irishexaminer.com for more Irish gifts under €50**



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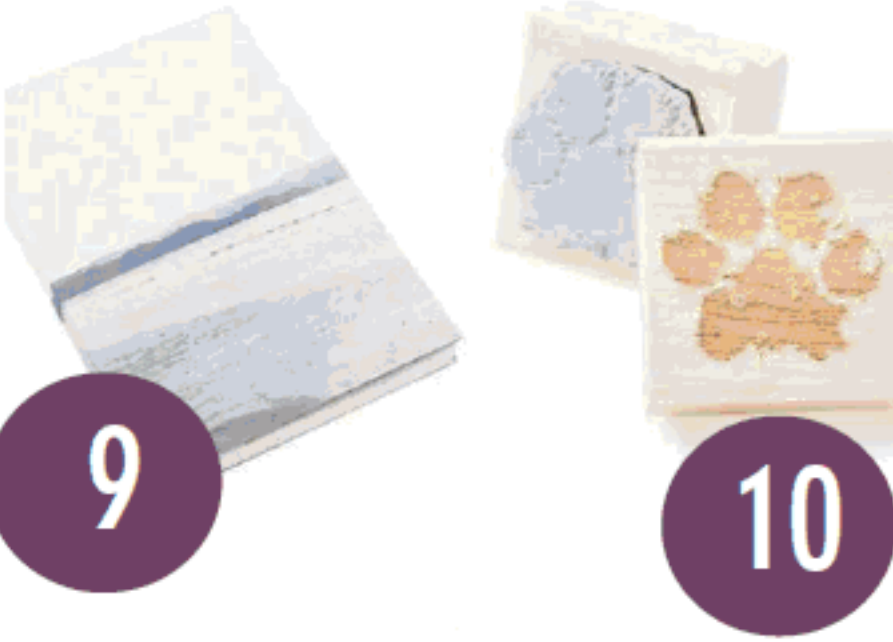


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## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



Central Remedial Clinic co-founder Kathleen O'Rourke also successfully promoted women's health and fitness, writes **Clodagh Finn**

## Fitness pioneer who brought women into the public sphere

WHEN Kathleen O'Rourke set up the first branch of the Women's League of Health and Beauty in Dublin in 1934, it generated enormous interest among women — and anxiety among Catholic leaders concerned that women wearing shorts would contravene ideas of modesty in the new Irish state. Bishop John Charles McQuaid — later Archbishop — was a cousin of Kathleen's and he met her several times to insist that women wore skirts over their shorts. He also wanted the league to tone down its

'risqué' logo and remove the word 'beauty' from the title.

The league, the first mass keep-fit system developed by women for women, had been established four years previously in London by Dubliner Mary Bagot-Stack. Within a decade, it had some 100,000 members worldwide.

For the first time, here was a revolutionary exercise programme that put the focus on the female body. Little wonder it caused concern in a country that would, in 1937, introduce a constitution that treated "the women of the country as though they

were half-wits", to use the choice phrase of Margaret Buckley, first female president of Sinn Féin.

Bagot-Stack and Kathleen O'Rourke, however, were determined to make sure the league operated in Ireland, even if it meant changing the name, the logo, and the uniform. The beautiful British logo, which featured a member in shorts leaping through the air, was stripped of its 'racy' image. The word 'beauty' was dropped, and Irish members wore a skirt; an addition that backfired gloriously when those 'modest' skirts flew up while women put their legs in the air during floor exercises.

In any event, the organisation flourished. In May 1936, *The Irish Times* reported that three generations — daughters, mothers, and grandmothers — took part in the Women's League of Health in the Mansion House in Dublin. "Within five years, O'Rourke's classes grew in popularity," says Conor Heffernan, lecturer in the Sociology of Sport at Ulster University. "She trained hundreds of women a week and, more importantly, helped in the development of exercise classes for women across the island, in both Northern Ireland and Éire."

Mr Heffernan, author of *The History of Physical Culture in Ireland*, goes on to describe a woman of immense dynamism who acted as organiser, teacher, administrator and advocate and fought tooth and nail for her students. At one point, during World War II, she overcame security and visa issues so that her class could train in London.

Meantime, in Dublin, she held classes everywhere, including in Bewley's café in Dublin where, during promotional events, she had the people attending do exercises on the tables.

She had another battle on her hands when the Irish branch was invited to take part in Lingiad, a universal sport exhibition in Sweden in 1949. The invitation represented international recognition for the work being done here, yet the Irish government refused to provide any funding.

In articles reminiscent of recent struggles for funding for women's sport, journalist Anne Kelly wrote



Changemakers: Kathleen O'Rourke leading Ireland at the Lingiad sports event in Sweden in 1949.

a strongly worded piece in *The Irish Press* decrying the fact that the Irish gymnasts were "all dressed up" with nowhere to go.

Kathleen, though, engaged in a campaign of fundraising, promoting and organising. As Mr Heffernan puts it: "She had an evangelical zeal for health and fitness which propelled her well beyond the traditional roles assumed by women (or imposed on women) during the 1930s."

Her links stretched beyond Ireland which meant she was something of an anomaly in Irish society, he adds.

"This was a woman who not only established herself as an expert of health within her own country, but one who held an international reputation. From all accounts, she was an

incredibly learned, empathetic, and well-travelled individual. Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s alone, she made regular trips to England and mainland Europe where she established connections which lasted a lifetime."

The work for which she is perhaps best known — as co-founder of the Central Remedial Clinic — had yet to begin.

After the polio epidemics of 1948 and 1950, she was very conscious of the need to provide aftercare for people left with disabilities.

Kathleen O'Rourke, a remedial gymnast and a member of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, began to see children in her own city-centre flat in

Dublin in 1951. They were carried up three flights of stairs and treated on a dining-room table covered with blankets to bring them to the right height to receive rehabilitation therapy.

With orthopaedic surgeon Boyd Dunlop, Kathleen and her co-founder Valerie Goulding established a clinic in Goatstown before moving to Clontarf where it would become the Central Remedial Clinic.

Kathleen O'Rourke, meanwhile, continued to talk of the importance of getting and keeping physically fit.

She had a first-class diploma from the Liverpool College of Physical Education, and she used her qualifications to inform a lively weekly health column in *The Irish Press*.

She also set up the Dublin College

of Physical Education (now Thomond College, Limerick) and was the first to run ante-natal classes in Dublin. Mary McDaid has more reason than most to remember her. She is a part-time teacher at the Fitness League Ireland — as the League of Health is now known — and she went to Kathleen's early ante-natal classes in Dublin.

"They were wonderful. And Kathleen happily included men in the classes, making them do their breathing exercises beside their women," she says.

Kathleen O'Rourke would be pleased to know the league is still thriving, running more than 60 weekly sessions in Dublin, Kildare, and Wexford. It has also reinstated the original logo showing an early member leaping through the air — wearing shorts!

"So few people realise the profound impact she had on the Irish exercise world, and in particular on the rehabilitation provided by the Central Remedial Clinic, which is her legacy," Mary McDaid says.

Mr Heffernan adds: "Informally, O'Rourke's legacy can be found in the thousands of Irishwomen who train on a regular basis, unaware of the lengths their predecessors went to bring women out into the public sphere."

The last word, though, must go to Valerie Goulding, who paid tribute to a woman of "supernatural resources" who dedicated her life to helping others when she died in October 1980.

"If there had not been a Kathleen O'Rourke, there would never have been a Central Remedial Clinic..."

"There are many mothers also, who owe her so much for her teaching of natural childbirth. A brave and bright spirit and has left us."

■ Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Allison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her history of Ireland in 21 women, *Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is out now in paperback, €14.99.





Editor: Esther N  
McCarthy @estread

# LIFE/STYLE

Tuesday, 8 November, 2022

# Packs, tribes, and brotherhoods

As men's mental health and wellbeing comes into focus for November, **Mary Cate Smith** speaks to men of different ages and backgrounds on how they connect and reach out to one another

*"When men find a comfortable style of clothes – jeans and a t-shirt – they live in that for the rest of their lives. I think it might be the same where friends are concerned. You find somebody that fits you and you stick with that person for the rest of your life."*

Chris Keating, 59, grew up in Blackpool in Cork, building makeshift dams and swimming holes with eight of his best friends, including his brother. All the boys had nicknames: Chris was Teasey, the ultimate messenger of the gang and Cooksey was called after the Cookie Monster on account of him devouring Marietta biscuit sandwiches with lashings of butter.

Thinking back on his friendships, Chris realises now how lucky he was to have such a solid group of loyal comrades that he could spend hours on end with.

"Back in the 70s, there was only one channel on TV. You were expected to get out of the house at 10 o'clock – you wouldn't get back until six o'clock in the evening. We used to live in fields and rivers, make our way out to Blarney and beyond. When we read Tom Sawyer; that could have been a blueprint for our lives."

A love of music, adventure, and reading bound Chris and his friends together. In their late teens, early 20s, they religiously went to the Arcadia, the Northside dance hall across from Kent train station where bands like The Cure, U2, and Microdisney played before reaching international fame.

The group had diverse interests and personalities but the one thing they all had in common was their love for a good laugh. As the years went on and the men worked through issues like marital breakdowns, substance abuse, and the death of their good friend Decie, their friendships developed and strengthened.

"We've been together since we



Chris Keating at The Pav, Carey's Lane, Cork City. Picture: Larry Cummins



Darragh Fleming runs a mental health blog called 'Thoughts Too Big'. Picture: Eddie O'Hare

were eight years of age. It's beyond friendship now, these are my brothers."

When Declan Newman, a local sign writer in Skibbereen and an integral part of the friendship group passed away, they realised how much he had connected them all. Another friend, Liam, suggested creating a Whatsapp group and the now men keep in touch via the app as well as bumping into each other for "crafty pints" around Cork on the regular.

Three of the men are working on a comic strip together. The lead character is a robot named Decie after their late friend.

The friend group has its own way of communicating with each other, says Chris. When his first marriage broke up, his friend Liam McKahey of Costeau wrote a song that helped to snap him out of a downward spiral of depression and self-pity.

"I was full of anger and resentment, feeling tortured and victimised. What did he do only write a song about me?" Chris laughs as he didn't exactly relish the opportunity to confront his feelings at the time but when he was ready to face him demons, the song actually moved him and he still likes it to this day.

As the men have moved around the world, they seem to share a telepathic connection with each other, says Chris, and often can sense when the other is about to ring. He feels very



Liam McKahey and Australian musician Davey Ray Moor, of the band Costeau.

lucky to have had such enduring friendships.

"When men find a comfortable style of clothes – jeans and a T-shirt – they live in that for the rest of their lives. I think it might be the same where friends are concerned. You find somebody that fits you and you stick with that person for the rest of your life."

**Creating safe spaces for emotions**  
An important part of friendship for men and boys is finding a friend that

"gets you", says Kevin O'Sullivan, (talktokev.com) an integrative psychotherapist, nurse, and life coach for children and adults. Adolescent boys and men often struggle to resolve conflict and regulate emotions in their day-to-day lives, says Kevin who sees a lot of teenage boys with undiagnosed autism or Asperger's Syndrome. Once they get that diagnosis, it's a lot easier for them to find ways of communicating effectively, he says and maintain friendships whilst disagreeing on issues both big

and small.

Emotional literacy in male-to-male friendships can suffer if there isn't an example set by the parents, says Kevin. Often, the only safe space for men and boys to release emotion is on the sports field, leading to outbursts of aggression that may seem disproportionate to events transpiring in the game.

He mentions the fictional character of Connell Waldron, the protagonist of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, who was a star player on the GAA pitch but an "emotional wreck" on the inside.

**'This is really hard'**

Mental health advocate and writer Darragh Fleming, 28, (thoughtstobig.ie) and Irish senior basketball player Adrian O'Sullivan, 29, have been close friends since the age of 14. When they were 17, their mutual friend Erbie died by suicide and their shared trauma brought them closer together.

"In the first instance, we were a support system for each other," says Darragh, "making sure we were getting through the grief as best we could." Overnight, their relationship went from "boys being boys" where conversations revolved around "alcohol, sport, and girls" to something much, much deeper, says Adrian. He recognised that Darragh had "his own troubles" with mental health and

since he wasn't in the same school, he regularly checked in over the phone and in person.

"There was never a day where it didn't feel right for me to talk about it with him. I always wanted to know more about what was going on in his life. I was making phone calls or texting people and asking how they were and I kind of got the ball rolling." Adrian remembers Darragh turning to him at one point and saying, "I'm not OK, this is really hard" and asking him, "What are we going to do?" Their friendship felt like a judgement-free zone and even though Adrian didn't have all the answers, the fact that he listened to Darragh talk it out and "get stuff off his chest" was cathartic. Adrian felt that he could rely on Darragh to be there for him too.

"We leaned on one another. If there was something wrong, it always helped to talk about it with. And Darragh was a really good listener."

What's important is that they [Adrian and his other friends] were just giving me the space to say it," says Darragh. They were listening and I could vent."

The heaviest loads became a lot lighter when shared with his friends, according to Darragh. Any restrictive parameters of masculinity that had held them back felt utterly redundant after Erbie's death.

"It's not that you want to be fixed – that's an unrealistic expectation. It's saying I'm feeling anxious or depressed and just knowing that there's someone there you can talk to." Adrian was in a co-educational school and believes that being surrounded by girls and women was a positive influence and helped him access his "sensitive side." "Men have been conditioned to be a certain way for generations," says Darragh. In every generation, you're going to get a pocket of people who can flip the switch pretty quickly, but to get every man on board, it doesn't happen overnight."

**Friendships are universal**

Cork writer and documentarian Cónal Creedon believes that friendships are vital to his own personal sense of wellbeing. He feels that there is as much value in having acquaintances as much as deep friendships.

"I get just as much support from acquaintances, that Greek chorus of friends who wish me well without the need of profoundly deep emotional engagement. Most times – even when the future seems insurmountably bleak – all that's needed is a sympathetic ear to allow you express your anxiety or frustrations." Encouragement from friends is what keeps him going in the eye of the storm.

"I genuinely don't have a sense of masculine norm or male expectation. Friendships are universal, and they founder on lack of discretion and unrealistic expectations. When the world comes crumbling down around my ears, I turn to people."

## THE WOMEN WHO CHANGED IRELAND



When Customs officials seized the spermicidal jelly mother-of-four May McGee had ordered from the UK on the advice of a doctor, she was livid and took action that led to lasting change, writes **Clodagh Finn**

# She took on State – and won access to contraception

IT'S striking to hear May McGee describe how she coped with having four babies in just 23 months, between December 1968 and November 1970. "I used to feed them one, two, three, four," she says recalling how the little bundles were lined up in the family mobile home at Loughshinny in north county Dublin.

"Four bottles, four nappies," she says, and then makes four gestures, showing how she turned over each baby to wind it.

Any 27-year-old mother would have found that challenging. Money was tight and while the family caravan was big and relatively comfortable, it was not ideal. In a sense, though, that was the least of it. May

had experienced several health difficulties in pregnancy and had suffered a stroke before the birth of her second child. Having another child would put her life in danger.

And that was a real risk. "All he had to do was look at me and I got pregnant," she says now, pointing at her husband Séamus and dissolving into a peal of laughter. He joins in: "I was a fisherman and we used to say that all I had to do was take off my rubber boots and I'd be driving her to the Coombe [maternity hospital]."

It might be funny now but at the time May McGee went through hell. Her first child Martin was born two months prematurely on December 15, 1968. It was a difficult birth and May wasn't able to walk for months after-



May McGee (with Seamus, inset) took her case all the way to the Supreme Court and the judges ruled contraception was an issue between a husband and wife.

wards. Her baby was six weeks and two days old before she got to hold it. She also got shingles shortly afterwards and recalls how the nurses covered over the mirror in the hospital. "You'd think I had ten rounds with Mike Tyson, I was that bad," she says.

Shortly afterwards, she was pregnant again. Not long before her second baby was due, she was in her kitchen when she dropped a cup and felt "something give in her head". She was having a stroke and was rushed to hospital where she gave birth to her second son, Gerard, on January 2, 1970.

Her doctor James Loughran had already advised May to take the pill after the difficult birth of her first child. It was not illegal to use contraceptives in 1970s Ireland, but it was illegal to sell, offer, advertise or import them.

At the time, May McGee declined

as she thought God might punish her but after the birth of her second child, she was willing to try contraception. The pill was no longer an option given her medical history, but Dr Loughran advised a diaphragm to be used with spermicidal jelly.

May and Séamus McGee were all set to go ahead when May realised that she was pregnant again – with twins. Her twin girls Sharon and Sylvia were born on 15 November 1970. Again, it was a difficult birth but at least now, the couple had a contraceptive option. When they ordered spermicidal jelly from the UK, they were absolutely stunned when Customs intercepted it and sent them a letter advising them that they might be fined or, at worst, jailed.

"I was livid that somebody in government could tell us how to live our lives. I wasn't going to back down," says May. The couple went back to see Dr Loughran, who was involved

in the fledgling Irish Family Planning Association. When he asked if the McGees would be interested in trying to force the Government's hand on contraception, they said, "Why not?"

Their solicitor Dudley Potter enlisted the support of Donal Barrington and Seán MacBride who lodged a case in the High Court – McGee v Attorney General and the Revenue Commissioners – to argue that the prohibition on contraception was an infringement of May's personal rights and on the rights of her family and, therefore, unconstitutional.

In June 1972, both May and Séamus took the stand. May has had a hearing impairment since childhood and relies on lip-reading, yet she was determined to give evidence even though she found the experience intimidating.

"It was horrible," she recalls. "It's a very scary place to be, and you are being asked questions about six different ways. But I said to myself, we are here now."

She resented the intimate nature of the questions too, but made a point of looking directly at the judge, Andreas O'Keefe, then President of the High Court, when asked if she thought she and her husband should live as brother and sister for the rest of their lives.

"We are only human," she said. "Religion is important, but I think we have a right to live as human beings. We are husband and wife, and we cannot live as brother and sister."

Later, Séamus took the stand. When asked if he liked the idea of his wife using contraceptives, he replied: "I'd prefer to see her use contraceptives than be placing flowers on her grave."

Despite their strong testimony, the judge rejected the case. That simply strengthened May's resolve who was prepared to go to the Supreme Court or all the way to Europe if necessary. She recalls sitting in the gallery of the Supreme Court doing her knit-

ting during the four-day appeal in November 1973, letting the legal argument wash over her. A month later, on December 19, four of the five Supreme Court judges ruled in her favour, saying contraception was a matter for husband and wife and it should be free of interference from the State.

It was a landmark win but at the time – and even now – the McGees didn't think they had achieved anything momentous. "I don't think I did something great, but I'm glad if it helped. It was one up for the woman, though, and we still have to fight our corner all the time," says May.

Messages of congratulations poured in, some from as far away as Hawaii. There was one from the World Health Organisation, too, though not everyone was happy.

Séamus recalls going to Mass one Sunday and the priest said that certain people in the parish had brought the Church into disrepute. "We stood up with our children and walked out the door. That's the last time I had sore knees in the church."

There were two more McGee children – Darren in 1980 and Andrea in 1981 – before Séamus had a vasectomy. Cue more laughter at the kitchen table of the couple's home in Skerries. They moved there from the mobile home shortly after the case. The couple's granddaughter Aisling McGee, a politics student, is sitting in on the conversation too. She did a university project on May McGee to remind her generation of what her grandmother did. "She doesn't bring it up much, but she changed Ireland."

And she is still trying to change not just Ireland but anywhere she sees women treated unfairly. "I get mad," says May. "You can't take away the women's rights."

Clodagh Finn is co-author with former Lord Mayor of Dublin Allison Gilliland of *Her Keys to the City*, a book that honours 80 women who made Dublin. Her history of Ireland in 21 women, *Through Her Eyes* (Gill Books), is just out in paperback, €14.99.



# FORUM

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**Clodagh Finn** talks to a prominent academic who overcame secrecy, bureaucracy, falsified documents and 'bare-faced' lies to discover his 'lost' aunts and uncles, in Ireland and abroad and, in some cases, introduce them to each other for the first time



MAIN: Professor Thomas Garavan looking through documents collected as part of his search for his mother's siblings. Picture: Denis Minihane  
 INSET: Thomas as a baby in his mother Margaret's arms and Aunt Mary in 1961. Picture: Courtesy of Prof Thomas Garavan

**T**HOMAS Garavan, professor of leadership practice at University College Cork, was 12 years old before he found out his mother had a sister. Just as he was getting to know his "new" aunt, he found out he had a second aunt. And then, more than a decade later, in 1982, he discovered his mother had a third sister. And three brothers. None of them knew of each other's existence.

Another three decades passed before he discovered, in 2011, that one of the sisters had died as an infant in Tuam Children's Home in 1936. He found her death cert but not a burial record so he wonders if she is among the 796 dishonoured souls committed to the earth in a mass sewage-tank grave which was discovered by historian Catherine Corless.

"You couldn't make this up," he says, again and again, as he explains how the Irish State sundered his mother's family and how he spent decades piecing it together again.

Seven siblings were taken from his married grandparents in Co Mayo and put into Tuam Home between 1934 and 1940.

He stresses the word "married" because people tend to think that only children born to single mothers ended up in those dark institutions, although the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes does specify that Tuam was never just a mother and baby home.

Some 655 of the 3,000-plus child residents in Tuam from 1925 to 1961 were children of married or widowed parents, but Thomas has yet to establish why all his grandparents' children were taken from them.

He has documents that say some of his aunts and uncles were born to parents of "no fixed abode". He has heard suggestions of alcohol abuse, and a rumour the father was the "black sheep" of the family.

None of that, however, explains how an officer of the State could effectively erase the familial ties between seven siblings.

There is no explanation in the commission's final report or any account of what happened to the children once they were boarded out.

"The report is an utter whitewash," Thomas says. "It is a sanitised and very selective version of what really happened."

That is why he wants to shine a light on how his aunts and uncles were first taken into care, then later

# The State broke a woman's family apart; her son pieced it back together again

boarded out and subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse over a period of decades.

His Aunt Mary got pregnant at 13 and was forced to marry a man considerably older than her.

His Uncle Joe was "tampered with by priests", while his Uncle John was boarded out and treated as a slave.

But this is not a miserabilist account. Prof Garavan is keen to stress that. It is the story of how he overcame secrecy, bureaucracy, falsified documents and "bare-faced" lies to forge new relationships with his own family and, in some cases, introduce them to each other for the first time.

It all started one Sunday in 1972 when a woman and her daughter came to the door of the family home in Newport, Co Mayo, asking if his mother, Margaret, was in.

A 12-year-old Thomas said she wasn't, and asked who the callers were: "Oh," the woman said, "I'm your mother's sister." It was the first he ever heard of his mother having siblings," he says, still clearly rocked by the fact that he had spent so much of his childhood in the dark.

He asked them in and when his mother returned, tea was made and they chatted as if nothing unusual was taking place. When they had gone, his mother simply said that was her sister Mary and left it at that. The sisters hadn't seen each other in 10 years even though they lived just seven miles apart.

That out-of-the-blue encounter was the start of a journey of discovery that would take decades, but it eventually resulted in the piecing together of the "Humpty Dumpty" family that officers of the State had shattered into disparate pieces, as Thomas describes it.

Back in 1973, the academic who now has an international profile was still just Thomas, a pre-teen who was about to make another big discovery. The woman he believed to be his grandmother was actually his mother's foster mother.

"This lady also fostered another child from Tuam Home and it was [the other child] who told me that my mother was fostered. It was the first time I had ever heard any mention of the institution."

In the months that followed, Thomas started secondary school with



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the Christian Brothers in Westport and began to visit his Aunt Mary who worked in a café in the town.

"She told me to come in to her every day, that she would give me tea. I got to know her quite well." Still, there were some things that she wouldn't, or couldn't, talk about. She told him her father had died in 1944 but when he enquired about her mother, she didn't want to hear of her. There was lingering bitterness, resentment, and hurt that Mary's mother had never sought out her children in the intervening years.

Some years previously, in 1967, Mary had gone to see her mother who spent much of her adult life working as a maid in a big house in Ballina, Co Mayo. When she called, her mother slammed the door in her face and said she didn't want to hear from her again. An unforgivable blow.

Mary did, however, tell Thomas that there was another sister, Annie, who was living in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo. Mary had last met her 15 years previously, but Thomas's mother had not seen her for decades.

"I thought it was really strange," he says.

Over those years, his Aunt Mary also told him about living in Tuam Home in the 1930s.

"She told me all about Tuam," says Thomas, "and that it was the most awful place. 'Every time I come to Tuam,' she said, 'I feel it. It just gives me the shivers. Each day we had to go to school, and we were marched down the road after everyone. We wore these old clogs which made an awful lot of noise, and we were shepherd down to the local school.'

"My aunt had a dreadful time there. She was treated very badly; always hungry, unwashed and if she soiled her underwear, her head was stuck in a cold bath. It was the same for my mother. They were marched down to school and isolated. They were lepers in Tuam. The segregation was shocking. None of that is documented."

When he met his Aunt Annie for the first time in 1987 she also told him of the horror she experienced in Tuam Home. She spent two years there between 1935 until 1937.

He tried to recount those experiences as evidence to the commission of investigation but found its approach legalistic and bureaucratic.

"They wanted to hear from my mother and aunt, but they were not in a position to give evidence. The whole approach was highly legalistic. There was nothing humanitarian about it at all."

A number of witnesses did give evidence to the commission about Tuam. Some spoke well of their time there, but others spoke of not getting enough to eat — one woman recalls eating moss off the walls — while another former resident said he found it very difficult to find out who his parents were when he first went looking.

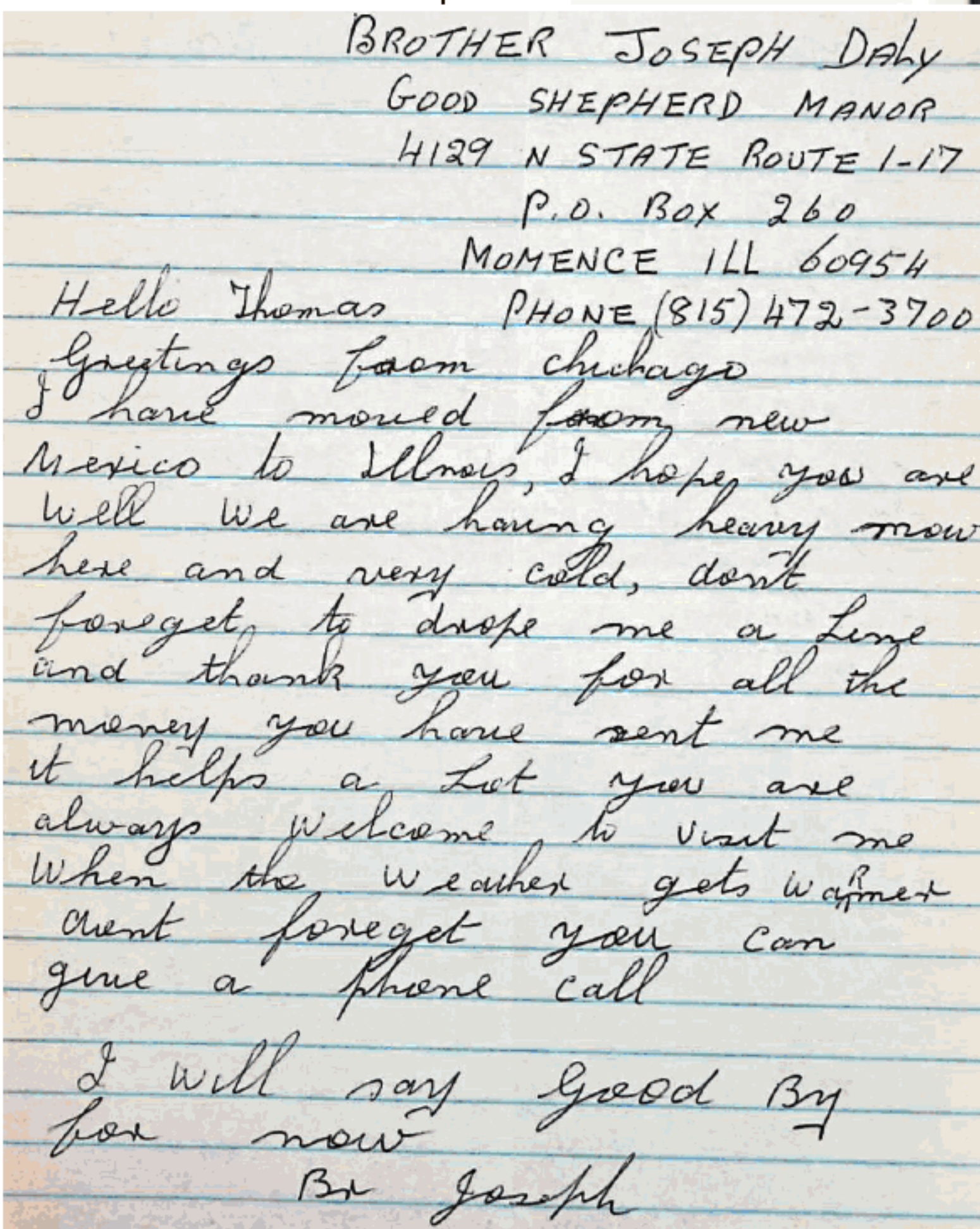
None of those experiences are reflected in the report's final recommendations, Prof Garavan says.

And there is next to nothing on the process of taking "legitimate" children from their parents, apart from this fragment from 1945.

"Dr [Florence] Dillon commented on the 'legitimate' children in the home. She reported that the 'matron informed me that the county manager sends in children of mothers going to the Central Hospital as patients', and the NSPCC inspector 'sends in whole families'."

Meantime, Thomas got on with his life, studying work psychology and human resource management at University of Limerick in the early 1980s. He was home in Newport one weekend when he met a cousin in a pub who, in time-honoured Irish tradition, said he had a message for his mother. His cousin had been visiting the county home in Castlebar when he saw a woman in a bed whom he mistook for Thomas's mother. It was, in fact, his grandmother, but the resemblance between the two women was uncanny.

Thomas did all he could to persuade his mother and aunts to go to



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A letter to Prof Thomas Garavan from his late uncle, Michael Joseph Daly; (MAIN PICTURE) Prof Thomas Garavan; his Uncle Joseph in 2011, in Albuquerque; his Aunt Mary with her foster father in about 1947. Main Picture: Denis Minihane. Family photos courtesy of Prof Thomas Garavan

'Isn't it shocking to find out about all of these siblings that my mother knew their parents couldn't keep them. They all had these little fragments of'



see her, but his requests "engendered a virulent reaction".

He went himself, though, only to find a woman who batted away all questions about the past: "She was as closed a book as you could get."

When she died in 1981, it emerged at the funeral — "a small, sad, hush-hush affair" — that there were other children. "Ye have brothers," Mary and her sisters were told.

It was time to get serious. Thomas went to the registry of births and deaths in Dublin, ploughing through the records. He found another sister, Teresa Angela, and three brothers, Joseph, John, and Edward Daly.

"I felt weird about it. Isn't it shocking to find out about all of these siblings that my mother knew nothing about? They had all this separation stigma about them. They were second-class citizens because their parents couldn't keep them. They all had these little fragments of information, but not the full story. I said to myself, 'if it kills me, I'm going to find out what has happened'."

All through the 1990s, Thomas met brick wall after brick wall. He was refused access to the records of Tuam

Home and when he met a social worker in Galway, she confirmed that his mother was in the home, but gave him no more details.

In March 2011 he tried again, this time with a social worker in Castlebar, the town where, he believes, a local authority child officer sent all of his aunts and uncles to Tuam so many years before. He had hit the jackpot. He had finally located his family's records, although he was not allowed to see them.

"I felt like the student and the social worker was the schoolteacher. She said that she couldn't show me anything, but she could read the details from the Tuam Home records. It all came out ... dates and where they were boarded out to, and she confirmed for the first time that Teresa Angela had died. A week later, I ordered a death cert and it arrived. I was sad, but I took the view they were lucky more of them didn't die."

What struck him immediately as she spoke was the patchiness of the records. In some cases, there was no record at all of the dates the children were placed in the home. However, the dates the children were boarded out and the names of the foster parents were all documented.

"It was so very legalistic with references to the dates that contracts were signed," he says, shocked by the transactional nature of the exchange.

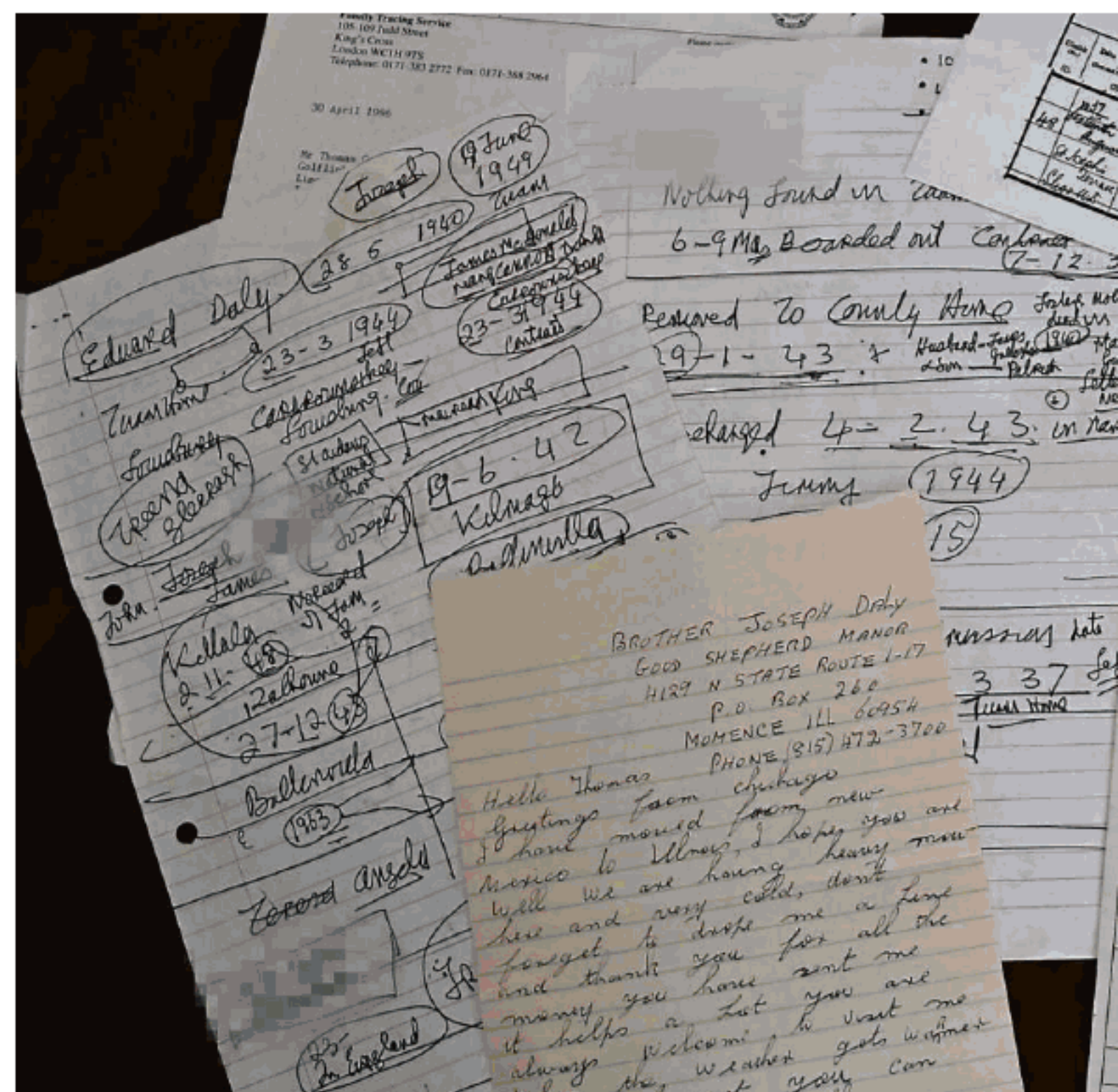
On that day in 2011, he also found out for the first time that Teresa Angela went in to Tuam Home from Castlebar in 1936.

She was only about nine months old and apparently already ill. She died a few weeks later of meningitis, according to her death cert. It is interesting to see that the commission's final report notes that 1936 was the worst year on record for deaths of "legitimate" children: "The death of 'legitimate' children peaked in 1936 when 17 children died."

He also got confirmation that his aunts Mary (born in 1928) and Annie (born in 1932) were sent to the same foster home, something which his Aunt Mary had told him. Mary was boarded out on December 7, 1935, and her sister followed two years later.

His mother was fostered out in 1940/41 to another family in the same town, but had no idea her sisters were nearby. It was not until 1942 when his mother was nine that she found out, in a chance meeting after Mass, that she had two sisters.

"It happened by accident," Thomas says, "My mother's two sisters, who were a few years older, approached her after Mass and told her that they were her sisters. My mother's foster mother tried to persuade her that this was not correct; however, her sisters persisted and eventually my mother was allowed talk to them. You couldn't make this up."



Some of the documents which Professor Thomas Garavan has collected and notes he has taken during the search for his mother's siblings. Picture: Denis Minihane



Thomas Garavan's Aunt Annie with two of her daughters and a friend in the mid-1970s. Thomas met Annie for the first time in 1987. Picture courtesy of Prof Thomas Garavan

**H**IS MOTHER was born in 1933 and was taken into Tuam Home when she was five years old. She was there for a few months, returned home to her parents, then sent back to the home before she was eventually fostered out in 1941.

Unbeknownst to her, Joseph, her brother, was also in the home around the same time and, like her, was put in for a time, taken out for a while and finally boarded out to Kiltimagh on June 9, 1942.

"What becomes clear from the records is that my grandmother tried to hold on to her children, but was unable to do so," says Thomas.

After providing details and dates, the social worker warned Thomas contacting his relatives might be complicated, and they might not want to see him. It didn't deter him. If anything, it strengthened his resolve.

He also now had vital information, knowing where his relatives had grown up: "That was a significant piece of information because for the

first time I knew where to start fishing, village-wise. There is a lot of organisational memory in villages and people will remember things."

He started with Joseph and phoned Kiltimagh church where he found a digitised record of his Confirmation. When the local priest saw the dates, he called out to his housekeeper, who was around the same age, to ask if she remembered him.

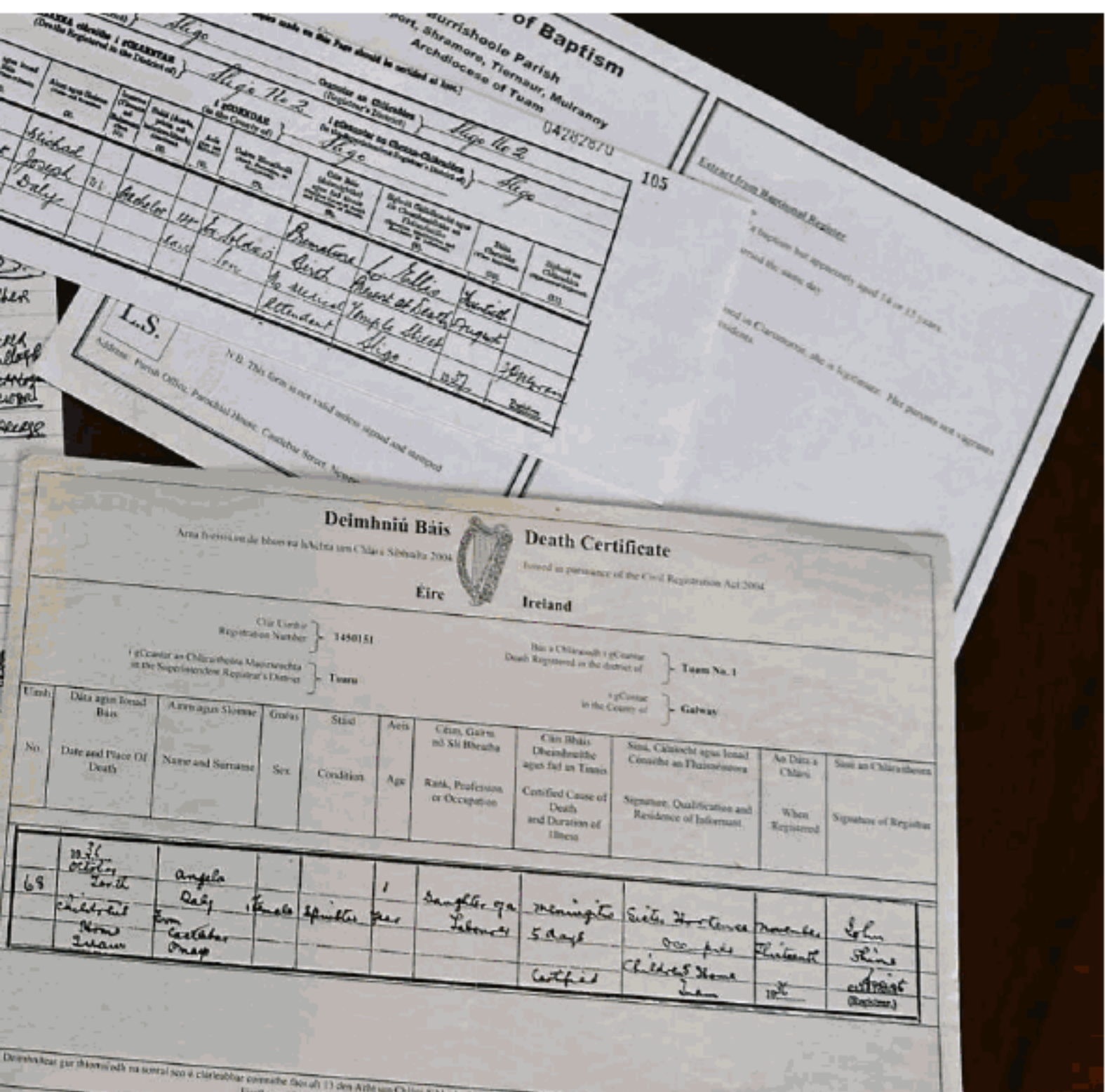
"I knew him well," she said. "Jo-



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ew nothing about? They had all this separation stigma about them. They were second-class citizens, but not the full story. I said to myself, if it kills me, I'm going to find out what



life without knowing that he had any siblings. He went looking for his family and he got a genealogist, but they found nothing. He gave it up as a bad job. It's an awful thing to go through life not knowing who you are or where you came from."

When Br Joseph died of bone cancer in 2019, there was some comfort in knowing that he had finally found out about his family. His family, too, learned for the first time what had happened to him.

He was treated terribly in his first two foster homes. There was a shooting incident in the first and he was quickly moved to a second where, he says, two priests "tampered" with him. After that he moved to a third family — Pauline's — whom he loved.

As an adult, he worked for a farmer in Longford who lodged him in a barn and worked him to the bone. He left and went to England and did a series of jobs before finding a late vocation.

"He joined the Brothers because he had no family. He loved working with the poor, but he was continually restless. He was always on the move," Thomas says, tracing his uncle's journey from England to New Mexico, then Canada and New Jersey.

Finding his family, even so late in life, meant a lot to Joseph, although Thomas can't quite believe that his story is not only absent from the records of the State, but misrepresented.

When Thomas requested his Uncle Joseph's birth cert, he also received a death cert which claimed that his uncle had died in 1937.

It wasn't the first time that official documents obscured the truth. In his Aunt Mary's case, he was shocked to find that she had been baptised on the day of her wedding "because her age was not known". Her age was known, however. She was born on November 11, 1928, which meant she wasn't yet 15 at her February wedding in 1943 to the considerably older man who got her pregnant while she was in a foster home.

"Three months afterwards, she had a son. She was 14 when she had the baby and her husband was 30-something," Thomas recounts.

"She had 11 more children before he kicked her out and she became a deserted wife. She had three young children under the age of 12. The Sacred Heart nuns in Westport took her in and gave her accommodation and provided schooling for the children. The others had grown up. Two died, one in a tragic accident at age three, the other was a cot death.

"She then got a job in that café in Westport and then she got her own house. When the husband who had thrown her out died, she buried him. That is how dutiful she is. She then met another man and married him. Mary is 94 now. She is fully with it.

The woman has had nine lives when it came to trauma."

While her marriage cert reinvents her age, it also contains an interesting correction. The original cert noted that her parents were vagrants, but some time later, a few lines were added by a "2nd priest". "This girl was baptised in Claremorris, she is legitimate. Her parents are not vagrants. They were decent residents," the priest's addendum states.

If that was the case, why then were all their children taken from them? It's a question yet to be answered.

In the meantime, the three living sisters, Margaret, Mary and Annie, had rekindled a relationship but had yet to find two missing brothers, Eddie and John, Joseph's twin.

Thomas made no progress at all with Eddie until 2013. He went to a church in Louisburgh and found a decades-old address. When he went to the location, he found an abandoned house but, again, the memory that insinuates itself into the fibres of a local parish gave him an important lead.

A neighbour pointed him in the direction of a man who had been Eddie's best man. He found that man

and established that his uncle had married a woman called Kathleen, in Telford, in the UK. This was enough to mine the UK register of electors and he found a possible address.

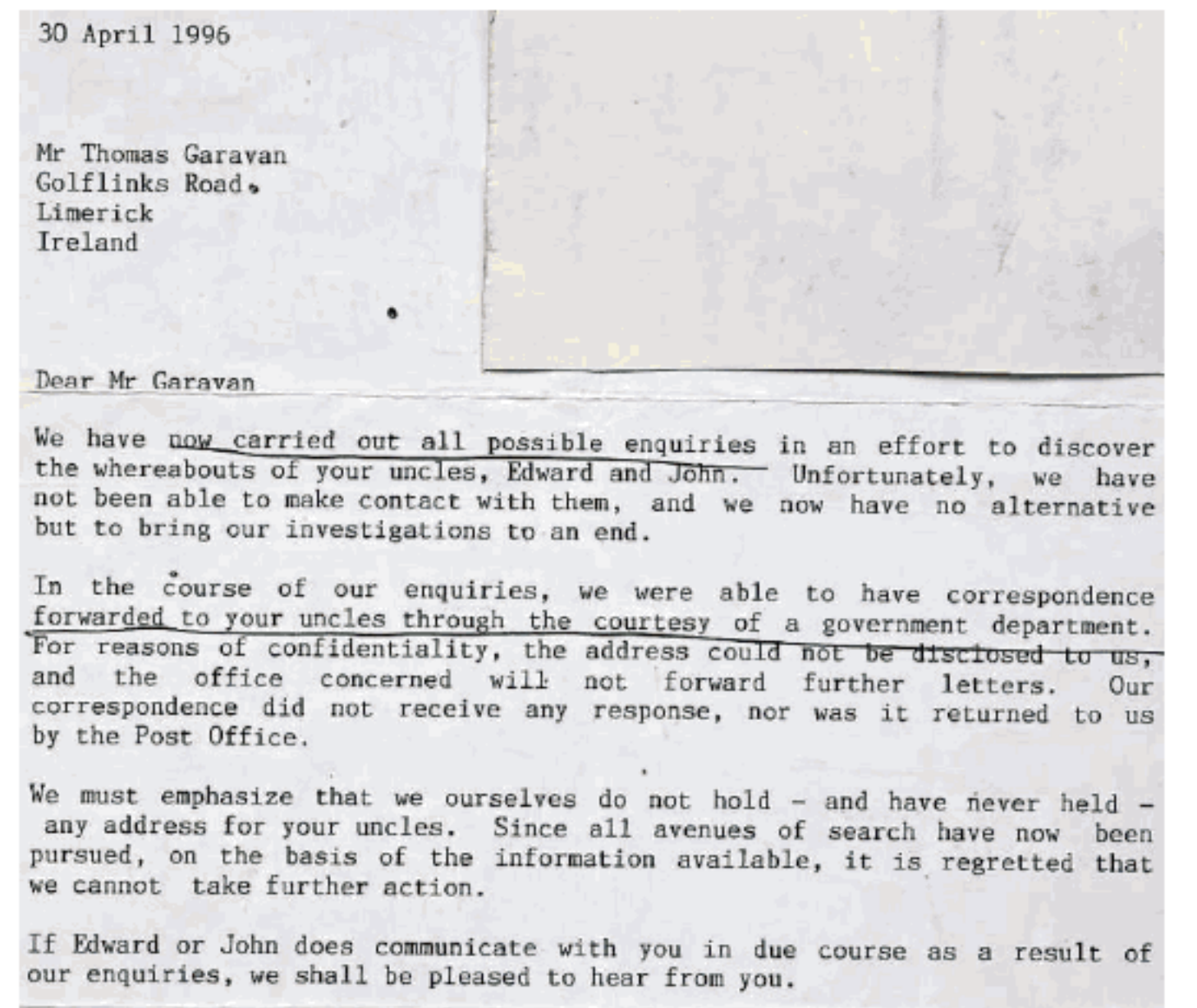
It was September 2014 before Thomas Garavan got to Telford. He asked directions in the shop at the top of the road and was told to go to the fifth house on the right. He called, but nobody was at home.

"I was coming up the road again and who was coming towards me only the woman in the shop. 'The man you are looking for,' she said, 'his son has just gone down the road'."

He called again and after some time a man answered the door. There was silence and disbelief as it was clear to the man in the house that he was looking at a close relative, the resemblance was so striking.

"Jesus," he said, "I knew that this day could happen."

The man was called Eddie after his father. He invited his first cousin in



A letter from the Salvation Army to Thomas Garavan confirming they were able to send messages to two of his two uncles, Edward and John, the first confirmation he received that they were alive. Picture: Denis Minihane

seph went to school with me. There's a woman down the road in Kiltimagh who will know all about him."

Thomas Garavan couldn't believe his ears. Here was a direct connection to an uncle he knew nothing about.

"I said, 'I'm going to pull the bull by the horns now and call to this woman'."

He drove the short distance from Castlebar to Kiltimagh and called to the house. On reflection, he was glad nobody was in as "it wasn't the wisest thing to do". He later rang the woman, Pauline, whose mother had fostered Joseph. Pauline believed Joseph had no siblings, but after tea and a two-and-a-half hour chat, she was convinced otherwise.

Thomas found out his uncle was a Christian Brother with the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Pauline agreed to ring him and ask if he'd like to speak to his unknown nephew. Four days later, they spoke.

"It was St Patrick's Day in 2011. I

rang him and said, 'I believe I am your nephew.' 'Oh no,' he said. 'I was the lone ranger. There was nobody but me.'"

He was incredulous when he heard that he had six siblings, one of whom was a twin, yet open to the news. Two months later, Thomas flew out to Albuquerque to meet him.

"I arrived at the airport and there was a posse to meet me. Every single brother in the order was there to greet me, or to suss me out!"

When the order saw a photograph of Thomas's mother Margaret — she was the spitting image of Joseph — they were convinced of the blood tie. It took the man himself some months to process the information, but over the following months and years, nephew and uncle got to know each other very well.

There were seven more visits and while Thomas's mother and aunt didn't feel up to meeting their lost brother in person, they spoke over the phone.

"He went through 70 years of his



# FORUM

## I've had the last laugh as I shut Twitter's door on my way out

Perhaps you never used Twitter. If so, I envy you. Also, you're in the majority, the vast majority.

Of the 8bn of us here on the planet, just an estimated high of 40m people ever had a Twitter account. A small proportion used the platform a lot, and its creators could never quite figure out how to monetise its users.

Twitter was significant because the people who did, and a dwindling number who still do use it, often had an outsize influence on other media. Workers in media industries such as TV, radio, newspapers, and social media, were drawn to the platform, meaning Twitter reached past its users and into the real world through many other streams.

This influence is difficult to measure but undeniable.

Indeed, one of the theories gaining traction today about why Elon Musk wanted to take control of Twitter was because he wanted to use it to push his right-wing views.

MSNBC journalist Chris Hayes tweeted: "Nothing in the world is less surprising and easier to understand than a right-wing billionaire purchasing a media entity and immediately trying to use it to pursue his ideological agenda and class interests."

Zeshan Aleem, a colleague of Hayes, suspects the same, writing last week that "it's now impossible to ignore the emerging reality that Musk values owning Twitter as a powerful weapon for right-wing activism".

Gross, right? I deactivated my Twitter account back in April when Musk first put in a bid to buy it. Then I buckled and went back to it, for reasons I'll explain. Now, I've deactivated my account for good.

This is my slightly pathetic obituary for that particular corner of my digital life. There were plenty of mean-spirited, ugly, and strange aspects to my life on Twitter, but who wants to talk about trolls, bots, and misogyny at a funeral?

In the spirit of every good obituary, I will stick to the positive aspects of that little lost life.

“There were plenty of mean-spirited, ugly, and strange aspects to my life on Twitter, but who wants to talk about trolls, bots, and misogyny at a funeral?”

In 2007, a comedian at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival explained it to me in a pub. Sadly, I can't recall his name or who he is. I remember he was an English white man in his 20s, but past that there were no defining characteristics that stood out to me then or now.

He asked if I was on Twitter, and I thought it was a cute name for an app. He said something about how nice and simple it was, concerned only about your answer to the friendly question "what are you doing?"

Then he told me that using Twitter was like "sending a text message to everyone".

I am shaking my head as I write this, knowing

what happened in the decade that followed, but at that time, I thought that sending a text message to everyone was the coolest idea ever.

I was verified soon after I joined in 2009, which helped to, please excuse the phrase, "grow my followers" to a point where I could throw my weight around a little.

On Twitter, I found people to learn from, interesting thinkers who shared a couple of lines of their work from time to time, like breadcrumbs that lead to a book or a theory or an idea I could sink my teeth into later. I also found people to talk to about those books and ideas, people to befriend without ever meeting in real life.

The internet is real life, too, of course, but I would be overwhelmed with over 50,000 people following me around from day to day, even if they were only half-listening to me.

I could ask questions, make comments, promote my work, connect to people and, with various consequences, generally exercise my free speech. That felt valuable to me, and I reactivated my account for a couple of months this year. But that feeling is gone now, and so am I.

Now, in keeping with the funeral theme of this piece, let me tell you what I will miss the most: The jokes.

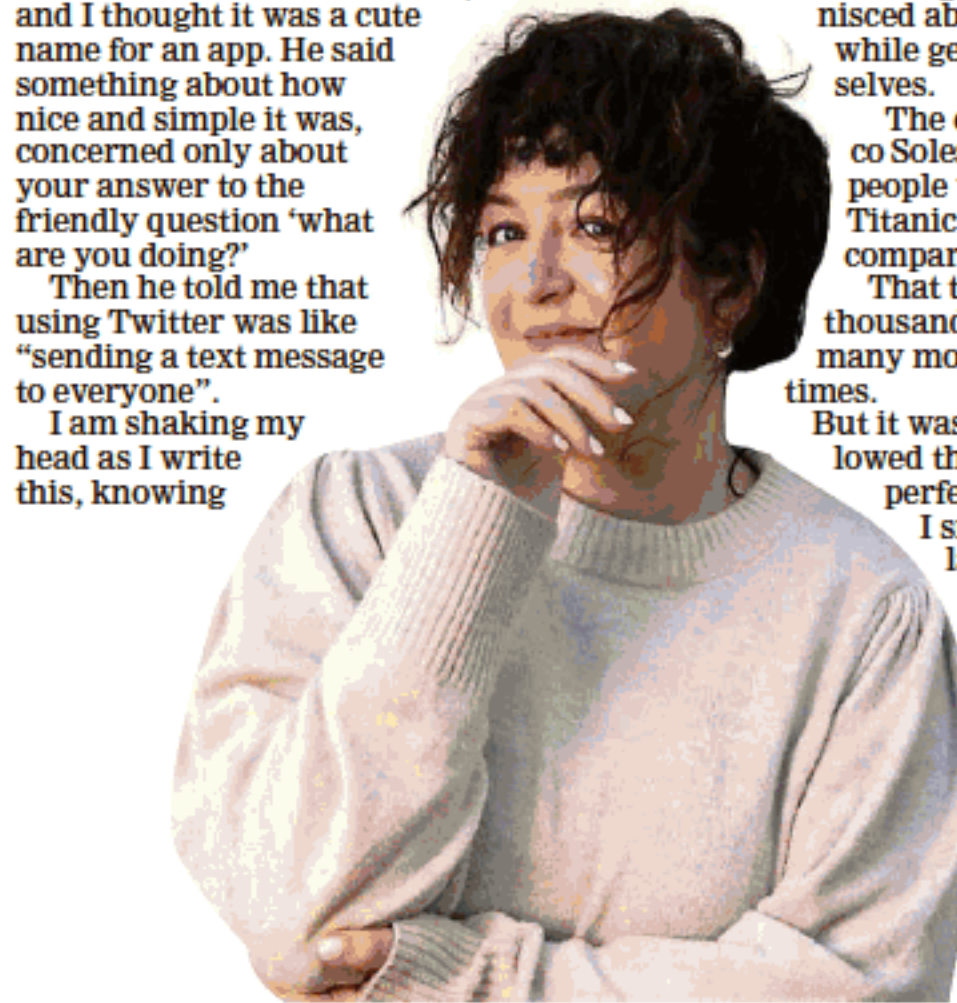
Elon Musk desperately wants to be funny but cannot, so it follows that the humour in everything he touches shrivels up stone-cold dead.

Last week, people like myself who were leaving after many years said their final goodbyes and reminisced about the platform while gently mocking themselves.

The comedian Gianmarco Solesì tweeted: "Imagine people who died on the Titanic finding out we compared that to this."

That tweet was shared thousands of times and liked many more thousands of times.

But it wasn't until Solesì followed that tweet up with a perfect Twitter joke that I smiled and for one last time felt the glow of a good time on Twitter. Employing the trifecta of qualities that used to work so well on the now ruined platform — funny, dark, and surprising, he tweeted: "This is way worse."



about the institution it ran for more than three decades.

Of the 281 boxes in the order's archive, just two related to Tuam.

When the home closed in 1961, the records went to Galway County Council and then to the Western Health Board in 1970. They became the property of the HSE in 2005 and, seven years later, they were transferred to the Child and Family Agency, Tusla.

IN ITS final report, the commission noted that some of the records may have been lost or destroyed over the years: "It is impossible to establish if the records currently held by the Child and Family Agency constitute all of the records which existed when Tuam closed in 1961. The Commission made digital copies of all these records."

With little to go on in Ireland, Thomas again turned to the British electoral register and after a false lead finally found his Uncle John in Birmingham.

"I went to visit him. He got an awful fright. He was very hesitant to meet me and didn't want to open up the past or hear that Joseph was his twin who, at one point, was living up the road from him," Thomas recalls.

He did, however, tell his nephew that he had been in Tuam Home for about two years and was fostered out on the Mayo/Sligo border to a childless couple who treated him as a workhorse on their farm.

"At age 14, he left the foster home and walked to Dublin. He had saved up enough money to get the boat to Liverpool. He worked on the roads; did all the things a typical Irish labourer would do and lived a very solitary life."

Thomas met his uncle twice more before learning he had died.

"What a sad way for him to live his life, to know nothing about his family. He went to the pub, lived in a rotten old, cold flat and spent his money in the bookies."

Just two of the siblings survive:

Mary who is thriving at age 94 and Thomas's mother who will be 90 soon, but has Alzheimer's disease. They have waited years for redress, though for Thomas's mother it is already too late.

When it does come, it will go nowhere near addressing the deep wounds of the past.

"The amounts given are, in my view, derisory and totally inadequate for what happened," says Thomas. "My family were put into Tuam by the State, yet the fostering out piece is not factored in at all. In the case of my mother and all of her siblings that would constitute quite a period."

When the siblings finally left Tuam, the records used the word "emancipated" to mark the day of their release.

"My Aunt Mary was not emancipated at all," says Thomas. "She was married so that they could cover up a crime. None of that damage, wrongdoing, cruelty and suffering is compensated for, or even considered in the scheme."

He criticises Children's Minister Roderic O'Gorman for being so rigid in the application of the €800m redress scheme and urges him to see the need for it to change. Having said that, he credits him with keeping his promise to allow the relatives of those who have already died to apply for redress.

On balance, though, Thomas says none of the measures introduced by the Government to deal with the scandals around mother and baby institutions are fit for purpose.

The Institutional Burials Bill was passed by the Oireachtas last summer to allow for a full-scale forensic excavation of children's remains in Tuam. It has yet to start.

"We must assume," says Thomas, "as my Aunt Teresa Angela died in 1936, that she is in the septic tank in Tuam. I have collected DNA from my mother so that we can do a test to find out if she is in there. But we still don't



know when it is going to happen or how it is going to be done.

"Everything has moved on that score at a snail's pace. And they have been pulled through it kicking and screaming."

He says the birth information and tracing legislation is important, but it will not help him in his search to find out who made the decision to put his mother and her siblings in Tuam Home.

"The child officer was obviously derelict in her duty because she — we believe it was a woman — did not join the dots to tell these seven children who their siblings were and, in the case of my uncles, Joe and Eddie, they gave them misinformation on their parents. They were told that their mother and father were deceased."

His mother wasn't told anything about her siblings and all of them were fostered out in a "cloak of secrecy", as Thomas puts it.

"A contract was signed, and foster parents were paid money. There must be others like them, although I could not ascertain from this famous commission report how many others there were."

He would encourage other affected people to tell their stories, but not through another commission.

"That is a failed model," he says. "It didn't work. They need to find another mechanism through which people can document their stories."

The very act of documenting is therapeutic, and it allows those stories to be there for the record. Historians will know that these are the true stories and experiences of people."

In his own case, though, there is a deep satisfaction in having had such success in finding his mother's siblings and meeting them. He was, he says, finally able to flesh out his mother's identity.

He wants to put his own experience on the record too so that others will know the real truth because, as he says one final time: "You couldn't make this up."



Thomas Garavan's Uncle Eddie, aged 20 in 1960, on the day of his marriage. Eddie was given wrong birth certs twice. Credit: family photos courtesy of Prof Thomas Garavan.