



LISTOWEL WRITERS' WEEK THE CURATOR'S STORY

The long-running festival's first professional curator Stephen Connolly, who has not been reappointed, describes his term as a traumatic experience



Deirdre Falvey

The wounds at Listowel Writers' Week, festering for some time, don't seem to have healed, and burst open again over the past week.

Its first professional curator Stephen Connolly, who has not been reappointed, describes his term as a traumatic experience and says there was sustained antagonism from some quarters towards him.

Following a long saga about restructuring Ireland's longest-running literary festival after an independent consultant's report, the large volunteer committee that had run the event for years was disbanded, and Connolly, a founder of Belfast literary organisation The Lifeboat, was appointed to curate the June 2023 programme.

Last August's report (an Arts Council requirement for ongoing funding), concerned about leadership and governance, recommended restructuring, overseen by chair Catherine Moylan and the board. The new curator faced a rapid turnaround: Connolly had to have most of the festival in place within 10 days of his appointment last December.

He moved to Kerry on January 4th and presented his full line-up to the board on February 15th. The contract was for one festival only, though Connolly says he was told to expect to plan for three years.

After the May 31st-June 4th festival, he says, there was no feedback or discussion. Within weeks, without a word to him ("a rational person would expect some feedback and a debriefing process"), the festival advertised for a 2024 curator. This was shortly after Moylan finished her term in early July.

What Connolly had thought was "a dream job" had gone sour.

Over the past week there has been social media commentary about references Connolly made in Andersonstown News about encountering anti-Northern bias in Listowel. He described comments on being introduced to people: "Could they not have got anyone Irish to do it?" He posted an email clip referring to volunteers with Northern accents being bussed in (to shift chairs). He says someone bizarrely compared the writers' week controversy with gerrymandering and civil rights abuses.

Perceived bias

There was disquiet over a perceived bias towards Northern writers (the festival included Wendy Erskine, Paul Brady, Michael Magee, Stephen Sexton, Lucy Caldwell and Paul Muldoon), and while "I started to doubt myself", he says "the numbers don't line up with that at all". Northern writers accounting for just 20 per cent of the line-up.

Responses have made much of how Northerners are often treated as outsiders and alien. While there's probably truth in that, Connolly also says the Northern angle is "a red-herring. It is a convenient way to write off" his experience.

"There were people in the town who were angry about the restructuring and the changes. There was a very strong feeling I was parachuted in" by the Arts Council. His appointment followed an open recruitment, but "that feeling that I was faceless bureaucracy allowed for the gloves to come off, and people felt empowered to say whatever they wanted".

He describes being out having lunch in Listowel and people would "come up and say, 'Oh you're the curator, I know all about you'" and ask what he was doing in

the town. This was "twice, three times" a day. Maybe they were being friendly? "That was never the tone. Somebody said, 'The sooner you're out of this town the better.'" Shortly after he broke the Listowel Parkrun record, he says he was followed out of a pub by three young men and heard them saying, "Let's see how fast he is now".

He describes an incident during the festival, in the midst of two best-selling events (with writer Liz Nugent followed by poet Paul Muldoon and musician Paul Brady in conversation). With two standing ovations still ringing in his ears, somebody ("I've no idea who it was") approached him, saying: "Well, that was interesting. I used to be involved here. You've destroyed everything." The disjuncture was almost comical, "in an absurd sense", he says.

For those unhappy with the restructuring, "I became an easy target. If they wanted to direct their anger about the restructuring process, I was a good receptacle. It was an oppressive atmosphere... There were people in the town who were raging

ted to getting to know the town and its people. He made lasting friends, was welcomed by many and mentions several kindnesses.

Moylan observes "he made time to get to know the town and the people in it. He made friends and had support from people who understood his vision and hopes for the festival. As a result, the programme included new venues and attracted a wider audience. It was a breath of fresh air".

Social media comments also mention how he "did a great job in keeping it all going. I was aware of absent locals who had been on committee but many others were there & hope they stay".

In a town of 4,000, Connolly reckons maybe 50 people went out of their way to be antagonistic. "I didn't know them. A lot of people didn't introduce themselves. I'm new to the place. They seemed to be people opposed to the disbanding of the committee. There were enough people for me to feel, it sounds paranoid, but that I was being watched."

He refers to social media comments



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about the restructure and it empowered them to say anything they wanted to me. It felt as though there was a collective agreement among the old guard that nothing was off-limits, the occasional jibe about the North was just a small part of it."

He says: "I do have a thick skin. Most people would have walked. But I'm a stubborn person. I wouldn't give up on something."

There was "sustained negativity towards Stephen", agrees former chair Moylan. "I received some negativity from sources so I know how difficult it has been for him. Thankfully, there were others who welcomed him and made every effort to include him in the community."

"His contribution as curator showed the potential of Listowel Writers' Week to be more ambitious and inclusive, and also to have engagement with a more diverse and younger audience."

Connolly says Moylan was subjected to a lot more anger than he was, as she was overseeing the restructure. "There was a huge amount of misogyny in the relentless criticism she received online and around Listowel."

But nothing is black and white. Connolly went into it enthusiastically, and commit-

■ Stephen Connolly also made lasting friends and was welcomed by many in Listowel, Co Kerry.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; MAEVE FOLEY

In a Facebook post, he has said this "resulted in the near destruction of one of the country's major arts festivals". He also called in the Seanad for the Minister for Arts to answer questions on the controversy.

In response to questions this week from The Irish Times about whether he was aware of the antagonism the former curator felt, O'Sullivan referenced his comments quoted in the Kerryman this week.

He objected to attempts "to demonise Listowel as an anti-Northern enclave". He described Listowel as "the most welcoming town in Ireland".

O'Sullivan said Connolly's appointment was welcomed by the former committee. "If the board had made attempts to meet with the group then he would have benefited from their expertise. He was really pitched in at the deep end, flying solo... This all goes back at the end of the day to the decision of a small group of people to sack the committee."

On Facebook posts, O'Sullivan previously praised a Radio Kerry interview with Connolly. "He acknowledged the hurt caused, which is more than his employers did. Had they agreed to be interviewed even once since last September we might have avoided the current debacle. I haven't met him but he sounds like a reasonable guy."

Was Connolly too sensitive to comments he got in Listowel? "Of course I was expecting resistance. I'm not stupid. I can't over-stress the regularity and intensity of it. It was sustained for months and ramped up in intensity the closer it got to the festival."

'Good job'

A friend of his who visited at Easter had wondered he was exaggerating, he says, but later observed "if anything you were not describing it strongly enough".

He says now: "It's disheartening when you know you did a good job." He describes his programme as "incredibly safe", with big names and best-selling authors. While many new people got involved in the festival, others refused to engage.

He talks about "trying to make real go of this", and doing lots of logistical administration, including of the ticketing system, that was not part of his job specification. He describes arriving at a hotel venue 25 minutes before an event he was hosting for 70 people, and putting the chairs out himself because no one had briefed the hotel on it. "Nobody was entirely sure how much was my responsibility."

There was a short window for new applications for curator, and he was abroad. "I'm starting to come out the other end. My mental health was shot by having the deal with all of it. I would have liked to stay on. The sad thing for me is that I immediately saw the potential for interesting things."

He observes it's a tight timescale for a new curator to pull the festival together given book publishing's calendar, and that it's the same fear for a longer period of work.

Meantime, many in Listowel hope for peace between the former committee and the board. The Kerryman reported this week that a new curator has been appointed, but the festival didn't respond to a request for confirmation.

Existing board member Tom Donovan was elected chairman in July. There was no response this week to attempts to contact Donovan, who is believed to be on holiday, nor from the festival generally.

As for Stephen Connolly: "I'm writing a novel now." We await to see if it's reminiscent of Listowel native John B. Keane's small town intrigue.

Ireland now has least competitive banking sector in Europe



David McWilliams

Banks are afraid to lend and therefore large parts of the economy are strapped for cash

In any economy, the job of a banking system is to hold deposits of savers and recycle those savings into the hands of those who want to spend or invest. It's that basic.

The way a bank makes money is by charging more to borrowers than it pays out to the people who want to save. The gap between both of these interest rates is called the "spread". For an economy to operate efficiently, its banking system must be lending money, or as they say in the jargon, "extending credit". If it is not extending credit, then the money that is deposited gets stuck in the banking system leading to a situation where the economy has lots of money, but no credit.

Ireland is one such economy – the banking system is little more than a safe for savers. This has been the case for some time. In 2009, Ireland's "domestic credit to private sector" (bank lending) was at 169.3 per cent of GDP. By 2021, this had declined to 27.9 per cent of GDP, according to the World Bank's calculations. This figure of domestic credit, accounting for only 27.9 per cent of national income, puts Ireland on a par with places such as sub-Saharan African countries, the Dominican Republic and Moldova. These are countries without a developed financial system, lacking banking infrastructure and a stable currency, characterised by capital flight and chronic current account deficits.

Ireland, in contrast, is one of the world's most profitable financial

Put simply, when the ECB cuts interest rates or raises interest rates, the banks should either pass on the increased interest rate hike to the customer (which they are not doing in Ireland as we saw in last week's column) and, when interest rates are reduced, the banks should encourage small businesses to avail of cheaper credit (which they are not doing as evidenced by the collapse in lending). As a result, monetary policy in Ireland is not working.

This means that the economy becomes lopsided, dominated by large multinational companies that have no need for bank credit because they have lots of other means of finance.

Meanwhile, there is an expanding public sector because it is financed by the State. In contrast, the small- and medium-sized sector, the entrepreneurial heartbeat of the economy, is squeezed for lack of credit.

It is quite clear that the existing Irish small business sector gave up on the banks quite some time ago. A recent government survey (2021-2022), found that 16 per cent of SMEs applied for bank finance up to March 2022, a decline from 20 per cent the year prior. It is the lowest level of demand for bank finance since the survey began in March 2012.

Nation of employees

The pandemic will have affected that figure but the picture that emerges is one where small businesses are financing themselves out of their own cash flow. This sounds prudent but implies a lack of ambition and scale and it also means that only existing businesses with strong cash flows can trade while start-ups and young business people wanting to set up shop on their own can't get credit. Entrepreneurial spirits are crushed and we become a nation of employees.

The dilemma with this scenario is that without entrepreneurs creating new products, a nation of employees will be an economy that stagnates. Such an economy might seem secure but, in truth, it is extremely vulnerable because it is static. In contrast, the entrepreneurial economy is dynamic and better able to roll with the punches.



“During a period when Irish interest rates were as low as they've ever been, Irish bank credit to small businesses has collapsed. Does that not strike you as strange?”

centres – the IFSC, home to a vast and developed banking infrastructure (although the ATMs this week may be slightly problematic). Ireland is also in the euro and is running a large current account surplus.

To put the bank credit picture into a rich nations' context, we can see that in most western countries, bank credit hovers around 100 per cent of income, a little bit less in countries that are not investing and are growing slowly and a little bit more in countries that are spending and growing more quickly.

According to the Global Innovation Index, in 2022 Ireland ranks 90th in the world when it comes to domestic credit to private sector as a percentage of GDP, with a score of 32.4. The amount of credit being extended to Irish-resident SMEs has been declining for well over a decade, with outstanding credit falling from €57.7 billion in 2010 to just €18.3 billion earlier this year.

Overhang

Ireland's banks are simply not lending. They are afraid to lend and therefore large parts of the economy are strapped for cash. This means that there is a huge overhang of potential credit that could be lent but is being hoarded.

Did you ever ask yourself why those small builders, for example, who used to build a dozen houses here and there in your locality don't seem to be around any more? They can't get credit at reasonable rates – despite interest rates being so low. Credit is part of the reason. During an period when Irish interest rates were as low as they've ever been, Irish bank credit to small businesses has collapsed. Does that not strike you as strange?

It is not only strange, it is profoundly dysfunctional and should be the number one concern of our Central Bank because if the banks are not lending, monetary policy is not working – and monetary policy is the Central Bank's mandate.

The core of the banking problem in Ireland is a lack of competition. We need more banks competing with each other to finance the growing economy. The reason the banks "cheat" customers out of income interest is because they can. The reason they don't lend is because they don't have to lend to make the money which they are robbing from the savers. The chief executive of a bank can suppress lending and take profits by cheating savers.

The banking system is broken, yet banks make huge profits. If that is not the definition of a stitched-up market, what is? Savers' money is captured and borrowers have nowhere else to go.

The Central Bank must make it more attractive for other banks to come into Ireland. This means less, not more, red tape, regulation and paperwork. Talk to anyone in the retail banking business in Ireland and they will tell you that the Central Bank is strangling competition.

They would say that of course but nonetheless we have ended up with the least competitive banking environment in Europe. The economy booms here because of a small number of huge companies in most sectors rather than many smaller companies fighting for market share. The customer gets shafted, paying through the nose for everything, most notably housing. The saver sees his or her income trousered by the banks, while the prospective small business borrower doesn't even go looking for a loan. All the while, working capital in an economy with an abundance of actual capital, disappears.

As a policymaker, you'd have to try hard to make that counterintuitive outcome a reality but the Department of Finance and Central Bank together have made it happen.

Ireland has the credit reality of a third-world country side by side with a financial sector that competes with the world's best. Is it any wonder the punters are clamouring for change?