



Footballers on guard for visit of Sligo men

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Lost figure from history discovered by chance

Judy Murphy talks to the author of a new book profiling 'extraordinary' woman

STORIES from within a three-mile radius of her own front door have provided local historian, author and journalist Mary J Murphy with the subject matter for not one, but two fascinating books.

The first, *Viking Summer*, based on the filming of Alfred the Great around Galway in 1886 was published in 2008.

Now the second, a fascinating account of society beauty, model, milliner, arts patron and entrepreneur Eva O'Flaherty is just gone to press. The story of this extraordinary woman, born in Lisdonagh House, Caherlistrane in 1874 might have slipped quietly into local folklore but for a chance encounter between Mary and a neighbour, Brendan Gannon in the parish GAA grounds in 2009.

Mary, her husband Gerry and their three children are big fans of Achill Island and holiday there every chance they can get. On hearing that they were just back from Achill, Brendan informed her there was a strong connection between Caherlistrane and the Mayo island. As Mary puts it in her introduction to the book, "every writerly atom in my being went on red alert", on hearing of the link.

Two years of painstaking research later, punctuated by many happy coincidences, the book has gone to print and will be launched in Scoil Acla on the island next month.

"Her family on both sides were nationalistic royalty," says Mary of Eva O'Flaherty whose enterprising nature provided employment for women on Achill, offering them a chance to stay at home at a time when emigration - seasonal and permanent - was the norm.

Eva's story is an extraordinary one and how Mary came to hear of it is equally extraordinary.

Brendan Gannon, who first told her about Eva, had worked with the Hoover Company in the 1950s, during which time he was sent to fix a broken machine at knitwear factory, St Colman's on Achill. While he was there, one of the employees realised he was from Caherlistrane in Galway.

Mary Glynn took him to meet her

boss, Miss Eva O'Flaherty, who had left Caherlistrane many decades before but still had connections with the area.

Eva, who had been a renowned beauty in her youth, was by that time almost blind and was in poor health. She asked Brendan to return to Achill with his father to help her organise her funeral arrangements. Realising she didn't have many years left, Eva's wish was to be buried in her home parish of Caherlistrane, in the family vault in Donaghpatrick Cemetery.

Brendan's father, John helped her plan this and after she died, on April 17, 1963, Brendan oversaw her interment in the family plot - his father had predeceased Eva.

Armed with that information from Brendan, Mary J Murphy began her research, which revealed a fascinating woman from a fascinating family.

Their base was Lisdonagh House on the shores of Lough Hackett - formerly Lough Cime - in Caherlistrane. Now a heritage guesthouse, Lisdonagh House was reputed to have been built by the Reddington family around 1720. The O'Flahertys moved in there in the mid 19th century and Eva was born here in 1874.

As Mary leans on a table in the hallway of the beautifully refurbished house, explaining Eva's complex family tree, it's obvious just how much research she has put into this project. She draws the tree from memory, explaining how Eva's mother, who had been widowed at a young age with seven children, married the much older Martin O'Flaherty, Eva's father. Eva's mother was Mary O'Gorman from Co Clare, whose father, Richard had been a brother of one of Daniel O'Connell's right-hand men. Eva's own father had been a member of the Young Ireland movement and was friends with all the major political figures including Charles Gavin Duffy, John Blake Dillon; "the lot", says Mary.

Mrs O'Flaherty died in 1881 on April 17 - co-incidentally Eva died on the same date in 1963.

Then, when Eva was 12, Martin O'Flaherty had to auction the house because of what his daughter subsequently described as "his unfortunate business dealings".

"He was a Justice of the Peace in Headford and was very cantankerous and litigious," says Mary, explaining that this information was given to her by local solicitor Henry Comerford, who is now retired. Henry's father's law firm, Henry Concannon & Co had



Author Mary J Murphy at Lisdonagh House, birthplace and home of the remarkable Eva O'Flaherty. PHOTO: STAN SHIELDS.

looked after Eva's affairs, while on a personal level, his family had been friendly with the O'Flahertys.

Apparently, in a fascinating twist of fate, when the house was auctioned, it was bought by a Peter Mahony, who had been deported to Australia years previously by the same Martin O'Flaherty in his capacity as Justice of the Peace.

Meanwhile, the O'Flahertys moved to Dublin where Eva went to the Catholic boarding school, Mount Anvil, with a short period in the Protestant Alexandra College when her father's funds ran low.

Eva trained as a milliner in Paris and worked as a model in London.

According to research in Achill, Mary discovered that she had been feted as the 'belle of the ball' in pre-World War I London society, where she modelled headgear for motorcars.

She was also a regular at the famous Café Royal in Regent Street, which was favoured by high society artistic people from 1865 until its closure in 2008.

In London, Eva's mentor was Dr Mark Ryan, who hailed from nearby Kilconly and who was a pivotal figure in Irish nationalism for many years - he had been inducted into the Fenians by

no less a person than Michael Davitt.

"He isn't so well known now, but he was a major behind-the-scenes figure," says Mary.

Other well-known figures to frequent the Café Royal include painters Paul Henry and James McNeill Whistler - who both frequented Achill in later years.

Why Eva abandoned her fashionable life in London for Achill, nobody really knows. There were rumours of a broken heart, but nobody can be certain. In any case, move to Achill she did and it was there Eva really came into her own.

Commenting on this book, Taoiseach Enda Kenny explains how Eva "helped turn a small knitting community in Dooagh into St Colman's Knitting Industry, a fully fledged business complete with knitting machines, which quickly amassed an extensive clientele from all over Ireland (and beyond)".

Eva was a fashionable woman, says Mary, and the factory reflected her high standards. Its stylish knitwear was exhibited at the Spring Show every year, while John Wayne was one of the many tourists who visited the island and bought himself a jumper from St Colman's.

Achill was a poor spot in the early

years of the 20th century, accessible to the mainland only by a swivel bridge. Eva's contribution was significant.

"She could have stayed in London or Paris and frittered her life away. Instead, she gave employment to women in Achill who would otherwise have had to go to Scotland picking potatoes, which would have meant separation from their families for months," says Mary. "The factory employed 26 to 30 people and there's nothing like it on Achill now."

St Colman's factory closed in 1970 having dribbled to a slow end after her death.

"Her dynamism was gone and also fashions were changing," says Mary of its demise.

Eva was a fair and supportive employer, and was held in high esteem by the women who worked in St Colman's, but she always maintained her reserve and, to this day, people on Achill who knew her refer to her as Ms O'Flaherty. She had a real sense of herself, says her biographer.

Eva was also a key figure in setting up the renowned Scoil Acla in 1910. This school, which aimed to further the cause of the Gaelic Revival declined for some years after her death but was re-

Lisdonagh House - Eva's spiritual home all her life

EVA O'Flaherty's childhood home, Lisdonagh House looks directly over Lough Hackett (formerly Lough Cime) onto Knockma Hill, the highest point in the area. With a track running around the lake - which houses an early Christian crannóg - it was an idyllic place to grow up.

The house was built in the early 1700s and was in the possession of the Flaherty's for several generations, until it had to be auctioned by Eva's father, Martin. Her first cousin was Mary Anne Kelly, who was better known as the 19th century nationalist writer Eva of the Nation.

Eva's father Martin auctioned the house in the mid 1880s because of financial problems, and it was bought by Peter Mahony who owned it until 1910 when it came into the possession of Harry Palmer.

The Palmers occupied it until 1994 until the last surviving member of the family, Valda Palmer. She had run it as a Country Homes of Ireland guest house for many years. After her death many of the contents were auctioned and more of them were destroyed - frustrating for a local historian.

The current owners, John and Finola Cooke, who bought Lisdonagh in 1996, have restored it to its original Georgian glory and now run it as a heritage guesthouse, where guests can ramble freely on its 100 acres of woodlands.

They have been hugely helpful to Mary J Murphy in researching this book and she says she owes them a huge debt of gratitude for allowing her access to the house at will.

And Lisdonagh House was central to Eva's story. Although Eva left when she was a child, it remained her spiritual home, and she carried a picture of it with her for the rest of her life until she died almost 80 years later.

vided by local people in 1985 - making it the longest running summer school in Ireland. Those who enjoyed her hospitality in Achill include a 'who's who' of artists and writers and include Graham Greene, Paul Henry, Derek Hill, Ernie O'Malley, Eamon de Valera and the Belgian artist Marie Howet.

Eva left money in her will for a stained glass window to be installed in Caherlistrane Church in honour of her family and it's still there, featuring St Brigid, St Patrick and St Jarlath. Money was also bequeathed to her cousins, the Clarkes of Thomastown House in Belclare who were named as next of kin in her *Irish Times* obituary.

Mary continues to be fascinated by her story and feels that there is much more to come about Eva and her family.

"There are so many aspects to it that you could have kept on working on it. I feel like I'm sitting on top of a volcano, or like a cork on a wild sea. This is only the start of it."

● *Achill's Eva O'Flaherty: Forgotten Island Heroine* is published by Knockma Publishing. Contact Mary Murphy at morma@eircom.net

Meticulous research yielded rich dividends

"FROM the start it was meant to be," says author Mary J Murphy about Achill's Eva O'Flaherty: *Forgotten Island Heroine*.

Indeed, right through her research, a series of coincidences helped Mary along, such as her discovery that local historian Anne Tierney of the Old Tuam Society was co-incidentally carrying out research into Eva's step-family, the Clarkes of Thomastown House, Belclare. Anne shared that research with Mary - which resulted in family photos from Eva's step grand-nephew, Michael Steemson in New Zealand being included in the book alongside fascinating photos from another step-grandnephew, Nicolas O'Gorman, who lives in London.

But, even with the happy coincidences, this biography of the fascinating Eva O'Flaherty would not exist without Mary's dedication.

The mother of three young children, who is originally from Menlough, did a post-graduate course in journalism at DCU after completing a degree in Eng-



Eva O'Flaherty, on the front left, and Catherine Glynn, her manageress, on the right front outside St. Colman's Knitting Industries in Dooagh, Achill, in 1926.

lish and Politics in the then UCC.

Although she has worked extensively in journalism since the mid 1980s, she now feels that the research involved in a historic book of this nature is her true calling. Certainly, she was more of a feature writer than a 'newsound' and for many years wrote a regular column on country music for this paper.

Achill's Eva O'Flaherty: Forgotten Island Heroine is published by Knockma Publishing, in which Mary's partners are Angela Burt and Damien Goodfellow, who have played a huge role in getting it to print.

It's a highly professional production in which Mary has cited all her sources - but has kept most of the references to the back of the book because she didn't want to interrupt the reading experience. In addition to all the research on the ground, she has listed 120 books that she ploughed through for information and to set Eva's story in context.

Achill's Eva O'Flaherty: Forgotten Island Heroine is dedicated to her late

father Andrew Murphy, of Menlough and Carnmore.

Meanwhile, Mary credits her husband Gerard, a stonemason, who works with Galway County Council with "keeping my feet on the ground".

They live in Belclare, a couple of miles from Lisdonagh House, with their children, Morgan (13) Mason (10) and eight-year-old Minette. Morgan is now in secondary school in St Jarlath's in Tuam, while Mason and Minette are in Castlehackett National School.

"Writing is a selfish business and Gerard lets me carry on with it," says a grateful Mary.

Gerard's father, 90-year-old Mick is president of the local GAA club where Mary first became aware of Eva O'Flaherty's story through Brendan Gannon. She would probably never have become involved with the GAA except she married into a family who are immersed in the organisation, so she can certainly thank Gerard for bringing Eva into her life.