

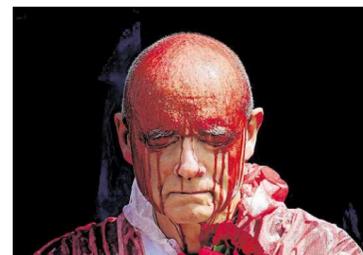
Weekend Review

Saturday, June 15, 2019 Editor Conor Goodman Phone 01-6758000 email weekend@irishtimes.com



#MeToo failure

A celebrity rape case in Brazil has seen its victim demonised.
Page 3



Extinction Rebellion

Inside the Irish branch of the climate action group.
Page 4

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF PETER BERGMANN

10 years ago this week, a man calling himself Peter Bergmann checked in to a hotel in Sligo town. Five days later, his body was found on Rosses Point beach. A decade on, we're still asking who he was



Rosita Boland

Senior Features Writer

In the early morning of June 16th, 2009, there was a low sea-fog hovering over Rosses Point beach, in Co Sligo. This fog was just beginning to rise soon after 6am when Arthur Kinsella and his son Brian drove into the beach's car-park, after a short journey from their home in nearby Cartron.

Brian Kinsella was training for a triathlon, and he ran ahead of his father across the sand, eager to enter the Atlantic and commence swimming.

The tide was out that morning, and as Arthur Kinsella was starting onto the beach, following his son, his eye caught sight of something unusual to his right. He knew Rosses Point beach intimately from many such morning expeditions. He went closer, to the unfamiliar object not far from the slipway, close to rocks.

This is what Arthur Kinsella found. "It was the body of a person and he appeared to have drowned and was lying face downwards on the sand."

At once, he called to his son to come back from the water. The fog had almost totally lifted by then. He noted that there were no footprints anywhere around the body, which appeared to have been washed up.

"He looked about 65, I thought," he recalls. "We walked around the body just to make sure that he was dead, and I actually placed my hand on his ankle and it was marble cold."

Seven kilometres from Rosses Point, unit sergeant Terry MacMahon had been on duty since 6am at Sligo Garda station. He was 45 minutes in to his shift when the call came in from Arthur Kinsella, informing him that the body of a man had been found washed up on the beach.

MacMahon immediately dispatched a car to the scene, but did not go himself. He had something urgent he needed to do before joining his colleagues at the scene.

"I actually went to a store room here in the station and did a bit of hunting and got a tarpaulin kind of a thing because we knew one of the things we needed to do if there was a body out there was to cover it, away from the public gaze," he says.

MacMahon reached the scene with the blue tarpaulin some 10 minutes after his other colleagues, and were taking statements from the Kinsella witnesses.

"It was quite obvious he was dead," he says. "A grey-haired gentleman, he looked to me like he hadn't been that long in the water."

MacMahon noted at once that the dead man, who was Caucasian, was oddly

dressed for a swimmer. He had on a pair of purple striped speedo type swimming trunks, with his underpants layered on top, and a navy T-shirt tucked into them. It seemed a strange combination of clothes to wear for a swim.

This was the first of a number of strange things about the dead man on the beach.

On the afternoon of June 12th, 2009, a Friday, a tall thin man with short grey hair and wearing glasses was captured on CCTV cameras at Derry's bus station. He was wearing a black leather jacket and carrying two black bags; one a holdall type bag, with two handles, and the other a laptop type bag slung over his shoulder.

He was looking for the Sligo bus. At 4pm, the service for Sligo departed. Two hours and 28 minutes later, this man was seen, again on CCTV, getting off the Derry bus in Sligo.

Both the bus and train stations in Sligo are within walking distance of several hotels in the town. It appears the tall thin man was not aware of this fact. He got into a taxi and asked the driver to bring him to a cheap place to stay.

The driver first went to the guesthouse, An Cruiscin Lan, on Connolly Street, but it was full. Although taxis do meet buses and trains at Sligo, the town's one official rank is located on Quay Street, outside Sligo City Hotel, and it is to this hotel they went next.

At 6.52pm, this man was recorded on CCTV entering Sligo City Hotel. A receptionist checked in the guest, later reported to have had an Austrian or Germanic accent.

A decade ago, it cost €65 for single occupancy with breakfast at the hotel. The walk-in guest paid in cash, in full, for three nights and was allocated room 705.

The name he wrote in the hotel register was Peter Bergmann. He was not asked to produce any proof of identity, either passport or credit card.

Like many public spaces, Sligo City Hotel has a number of CCTV cameras at different locations. One is pointed over the reception desk and another at the front door, through which all guests must come and go. Over the duration of the next three days, the guest in room 705 came and went a number of times.

His movements only became puzzling when gardai later reviewed the CCTV footage they gathered from the hotel, and from other businesses around the streets of the small town of Sligo.

It emerged that during his short stay in the hotel, Peter Bergmann had left the hotel no fewer than 13 times, carrying a purple plastic bag, which was evidently full of something. The bag was the size of one you would get in a supermarket, but the cameras picked up no identifying marks of any kind visible on the bag.

Each time he returned after departing with a full purple bag, he was not carrying anything. Like so much else about this case, it's unclear if he was returning with the same bag now folded unseen into one of the pockets of his black leather jacket, or if hidden in his hotel room was a stash of



■ Main image: A CCTV image of the man who called himself Peter Bergmann, in Sligo bus station, June 2009.

Top: John O'Reilly, now chief superintendent in Cavan-Monaghan, has never forgotten the case.

Above: Clothing and objects found in Peter Bergmann's pockets.

Right: Brian Scanlon, caretaker of Sligo cemetery at the unmarked grave.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAN BETSON

■ If you have been affected by any issues raised in this report, you can contact the following support services: Samaritans, dial 116123 / text 087 2609 090 / email jo@samaritans.ie Pieta House 1800 247 247 / text 'HELP' to 51444 / email mary@pieta.ie. Aware 1800 80 48 48. Visit yourmentalhealth.ie



similar plastic bags.

Objects don't vanish by themselves, suddenly disappearing like smoke into the ether. Back in 2009, John O'Reilly was the detective inspector attached to the Sligo-Leitrim division, and oversaw the case that was first logged as "Unidentified Male on Rosses Point Beach".

Despite the extensive network of CCTV cameras across Sligo town a decade ago, O'Reilly reports that "not a single piece" of footage showed Peter Bergmann disposing of the contents of this bag, 13 times over. "Not once does it show anywhere, where he may have disposed of that property," he says.

Nor is there any evidence that Peter Bergmann was meeting someone in Sligo and passing these things on to that person or persons. In all the careful scrutiny of the CCTV footage he features in, he is not once seen using a mobile phone, or in conversation with anyone, other than functional transactions at the hotel reception desk and the bus station.

What does O'Reilly think may have been in those bags? "Personal effects. But you know, we can talk about that until the cows come home but we can't speak about what we don't know. But I'd imagine he had clothing or personal effects, possibly a passport."

Peter Bergmann arrived in Sligo on a Friday. On the Saturday afternoon, he walked around the corner from the hotel to the town's main post office. He bought 10 stamps of 82c and was also given the free airmail stickers that post offices routinely dispense.

In 2009, it cost 55c to post a letter within Ireland. The rate for the rest of the world was 82c.

This transaction was captured on CCTV. At Sligo post office, there are boxes both inside and outside the building. There is a CCTV camera over the boxes that stand near the left entrance to the building (there are two doors leading inside, one brings you into the left of the interior and the other to the right). However, if you mail letters in boxes set into the exterior walls, there are no cameras to observe your actions.

"We got the CCTV footage from the post office," says O'Reilly. "And when we went to look at it – it was downloaded by a staff member – for some strange technological reason, the footage hadn't actually gone on to the USB stick, and when we went back to the post office, it was gone off their system."

"Had we had that, it is a possibility, and I stress, only a possibility, we might have been able to determine if he posted letters. But we cannot say with certainty that he actually posted 10 letters anywhere."

A pattern was beginning to emerge with Peter Bergmann's behaviour, as caught on CCTV during his few June days in Sligo a decade ago. He was never once captured disposing of any property; or mailing letters; or using a mobile phone; or meeting anyone.

ATLANTIC PODCAST

The unsolved mystery of Peter Bergmann

Listen on irishtimes.com/atlantic

It's difficult not to speculate that he appeared aware of where CCTV cameras were located. He did not have access to a car, so, as far as is known, he did not dispose of these items further afield.

Not one member of the passing public ever came forward to say they had noticed his actions as he rid himself of the contents of a large and noticeably purple plastic bag, 13 times over, in daylight.

"He had training of a sort, I think," speculates Terry MacMahon. "So it would be easy to see that he was ex-military or ex-police. Why I think that is because in relations to the cameras: how he was able to go about his business without people learning anything more about him."

On the Sunday, which was to be the third and final overnight Peter Bergmann had in Sligo City Hotel, he again went in search of a taxi, map in hand. The man at the top of the rank outside the hotel was Gerard Higgins.

"I got out of my minibus to say hello because a man with a map wishes to go somewhere," Higgins says. His passenger told him he was looking for a place to swim, and pointed to Strand Hill on the map. As a local, Higgins knew that Strand Hill was a surfing beach, and instead suggested Rosses Point, with its beautiful long sandy beaches. His passenger agreed, and on Higgins's suggestion, sat up front with him.

"He was a bit chatty, asking if there were buses going out there, and I told him yes, about once every hour."

Higgins particularly recalls this male passenger who told him he was from Austria, because of a "prominent" gold tooth. Later examinations of Peter Bergmann's body were to reveal he had a gold tooth in the upper back right of his mouth.

Although his passenger with the map and the gold tooth had specifically asked to be taken to a beach suitable for swimming, he did not actually swim. "We drove around Rosses Point. I showed him the two beaches, and I stopped at the car park at the entrance to the beach. He did not get out, but then said, can you bring me to the bus station?"

Higgins brought Peter Bergmann back

Continued on page 2

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF PETER BERGMANN

Continued from page 1

to Sligo, and dropped him off, as requested, at the bus station. "I gave him my card and told him if he wanted a taxi again, to call me. He was grateful and paid me with a brand new €20 note."

On Monday, June 15th, Peter Bergmann requested a late checkout of 1pm at Sligo City Hotel. When he appeared at reception to return his key, he was wearing a long-sleeved pale blue shirt, with a black tank top, dark trousers and a black leather jacket.

He was carrying three bags: the holdall and the bag with the shoulder strap he had had when checking in. The third was the purple plastic bag.

He checked out of the hotel shortly after 1pm. No taxi driver reported taking him the short distance back to Sligo bus station, so it is assumed he walked.

When he was caught on CCTV on arrival at the bus station at 1.32pm, he no longer had the black holdall bag with him.

It's possible that everything that had been in it on arrival at the hotel had since been disposed of in bins or other places around the town, unseen either by CCTV or members of the public. The bag looked to be a soft one, and when empty, it would fold up and slot easily into a bin.

At 1.32pm, the manager of the little bus station cafe sold Peter Bergmann a cappuccino and a toasted sandwich. He sat at one of the few tables there, alongside a woman to whom he did not speak.

During the time he sat at the table, he took a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote something on it. Then he tore it up. Like virtually all of his other personal belongings, it was never retrieved. The cafe at the station is no longer operational: it closed last year.

"On that particular day, I was returning from a break just after two o'clock when this gentleman approached me and asked about the bus to Rosses Point," recalls Vincent Dunbar, who was at that time the depot inspector at Sligo bus station.

The gentleman was Peter Bergmann. He knew that the next bus to Rosses Point left at 2.40pm, but not which bay it left from, which was the subject of his question to Dunbar.

There were in fact three buses after the 2.40pm service that served Rosses Point at that time. But Peter Bergmann, although he had taken a taxi out to the beach the previous day, was now instead focused on making the 2.40pm bus. It was to emerge later that he did not have an onward reservation at any hotel or any kind of accommodation in the vicinity.

"You'd think he was maybe just going to meet somebody, or going on business," Dunbar says.

"I learned afterwards he went for a swim, but he didn't strike me as a man that was going for a swim... The way he was dressed and what he was carrying with him. If anyone was going for a swim, you'd usually know: they'd have a towel rolled up and togs rolled up," he says. "He wasn't like that at all; he looked like a man that was on business."

Peter Bergmann did not thank Vincent Dunbar for his help as to which bay the Rosses Point bus would be departing from at 2.40pm. "He just turned and walked away," he says. "He just looked like a man that was stressed or in pain or not himself."

That June day the temperature reached 17 degrees in Sligo, and many people came to Rosses Point to swim and walk the beach. There was to be one high tide, at 12.06pm, at a height of 3m over the average low water mark. The next high tide was to be at 12.25am.

The Sligo bus dropped off its passengers at 3pm at the bus stop outside the Yeats Country Hotel. Nobody afterwards at the hotel ever recalled a tall thin man dressed in black coming in for a coffee, or food, or to use the bathroom.

At 4pm, Peter Bergmann was seen by a member of the public on the beach, with a black bag carried over his shoulder. At 5pm, he was seen near the Yacht Club, which is at the far left of what local people call the "first beach".

There is a sign close to the first beach, pointing to a place that has been in existence for more than a century: Deadman's Point. This is the small headland that extends out towards Coney Island. There's a story to the name, and like so many stories in Sligo, it's one with a Yeats connection.

The story goes that a seaman from another land died as his ship was entering Sligo Bay and was left behind and buried there, as the crew did not want to miss the tide. Superstition is often synonymous with the ocean: the seaman was buried with a loaf of bread and a shovel, should he possibly wake again.

Inspired by the story, Jack B Yeats painted Memory Harbour: the Yeats brothers often holidayed at their uncle's house at Rosses Point, Elnisore, now in ruins.

At 9.10pm, Peter Bergmann was seen by two women, carrying something; they weren't sure what it was.

At 9.30pm, he was seen on the beach, by husband and wife Dermot and Paula Lahiff. They had driven over from their home to watch the sunset.

"We were parked at the upper car park," Paula recalls. "There was this man walking parallel to the shore. He had his trousers rolled up to his knee and he was wearing a black jacket and he was kind of plodding ponderously along."

By that time of the day, the crowds on the beach had dissipated. Dermot Lahiff was watching the sun go down as he sat beside his wife in their car. The man with the black jacket was crossing back and forth against the sunset they had come to watch, illuminated in silhouette by the disappearing sun.

Dermot Lahiff describes the man they later knew as Peter Bergmann as "stepping very deliberately" when he padded barefoot through the water's edge, "one foot, then the other". It struck him "how strange his movement was, and it appeared to me to be some kind of a ritual in his procedure from right to left".

Lahiff recalls being suddenly reminded of scenes from his Galway childhood. "It reminded me of old photographs I would have seen from my childhood in Salthill; country folk visiting the beach, bathing with their trousers rolled up."

At 10.30pm, Peter Bergmann was seen

by a member of the public with a plastic bag and wearing his glasses.

At 11pm, he was again seen, by a different person, with a plastic bag.

Ten minutes later, he was seen, still wearing his glasses, sitting on one of the benches that overlook the first beach.

The final sighting of Peter Bergmann while he was alive was by a woman at 11.50pm. He was carrying a plastic bag, and walking along by the edge of the incoming ocean. High tide was to arrive within half an hour.

At 8am on June 16th, the man found on the beach near Deadman's Point was pronounced dead at the scene by Dr Valerie McGowan. His body was removed by undertakers to Sligo University Hospital at 8.20am, to await autopsy the following day.

Terry MacMahon and his colleagues from Sligo Garda station remained on Rosses Point beach, searching for the rest of the clothes and footwear that had clearly been discarded somewhere. They discovered a pile of clothes on a rock on the beach; clothes that matched the description of what witnesses were to later say they had seen the solitary tall thin man wearing the previous day; clothes that no other swimmer ever came to reclaim.

"It was as if he had taken off his shoes and then taken off his socks and then put his socks into his shoes and then his trousers, and then I think there was a kind of black V-neck jumper and they were all folded nice and neatly one on top of the other."

The clothes had had their labels cut out, as had the three items of clothing the dead man was found wearing, although the name of some brands still remained.

The clothes and items in the pockets that were found on Rosses Point beach that

morning are still held in storage at Sligo Garda station. They are all contained in one large cardboard box, with a label on the lid, that reads, "Clothing/Personal Items of Unidentified Body found at Rosses Point on 16/06/2009".

It's a long time since anyone looked at these clothes that Peter Bergmann folded so carefully and left on a coastal rock at nightfall 10 years ago.

When the items are lifted out of their storage box, sand starts slowly falling from the T-shirt Peter Bergmann was wearing when found dead. Tiny grains of sand from Rosses Point are gradually scattered across the desk; each one a bright point of light.

This is what was recovered from the beach by the Sligo gardai.

The clothes Peter Bergmann was wearing: a navy short-sleeved T-shirt; a pair of navy underpants; a pair of Speedo-type swimming trunks, with pink and purple stripes; a waterproof quartz watch, found on his left wrist.

Found on the rocks were: black leather Finn Comfort shoes, size 44, manufactured in 2002 in Germany; dark-coloured socks; a black leather C&A jacket; navy C&A chino trousers; a black sleeveless Tommy Hilfiger jumper; a black leather belt, called Key West USA, made in Italy.

Distributed in various pockets were these items: €140 in notes and €9 in coins, in an envelope; a packet of tissues, labelled "Taschentücher" (German for handkerchiefs); 55 milligrams of aspirin tablets, made by Bayer, manufactured in the Czech Republic and distributed in Germany; Hansplast sticking plasters; a bar of hotel soap in a blue unopened plastic wrapper, with the English words, Mild Soap, Hotel Care printed on it (when subsequently investigated, it was not of a brand made or stocked in any hotels in Ireland).

Not found among the possessions were: Peter Bergmann's glasses; the IO 82c

stamps he had bought in the post office; the long-sleeved blue shirt he was wearing when he left the Sligo City Hotel; the black shoulder bag; the purple plastic bag.

There was no ID of any kind. He had not been asked for any ID on checking into Sligo City Hotel.

"They are obliged to ask for ID," says John O'Reilly. "The legislation is very clear. All hotels and B&Bs; legally, they are obliged," he stresses. "Do they do it? I think we both know they don't."

Although the man who gave his name as Peter Bergmann was not asked for ID at the hotel, he did have to fill in his personal details on its guest register. The home address he gave was Ainstetterstr 15, Wien 4472. There is no such street as Ainstetterstr in Vienna/Wien, Austria does have a postal code system, in operation since 1966, using combinations of four digits, but Vienna's codes run only from 1000-1901. The address Peter Bergmann gave is a fabrication.

He spelled his surname in the register with two Ns. The usual practice of spelling this name in German is with one N at the end, not two.

Pathologist Clive Kilgallen conducted the autopsy on Peter Bergmann on Wednesday, June 17th at Sligo University Hospital. The results of the autopsy, which were not made public until the inquest on April 14th, 2010, contained two unexpected pieces of information.

Despite the fact the dead man had been found washed up on the Rosses Point beach, Kilgallen found that "there was no sign of classical salt water drowning". All the exterior evidence had pointed towards

This article is based on an Irish Times original podcast. Listen on irishtimes.com/atlantic

a man who waited until darkness to go swimming, perhaps with the intention of never returning. But he had not died by drowning.

Peter Bergmann had had terminal prostate cancer; at such an advanced stage that Clive Kilgallen believed it was impossible he could have been unaware of the fact. It had spread to his bones, and chest and lungs. Kilgallen estimated the prognosis was "weeks at most".

The cause of death was given as "acute cardiac arrest"; or in layman's terms, a heart attack. There was a standard toxicology report but, as is usual, it did not test for a range of substances that are banned from sale.

By the time the inquest came around, the man known as Peter Bergmann had been buried in an unmarked grave in Sligo City Cemetery. There were six people at the funeral on September 18th, 2009, including the undertaker and the man who dug the grave, Brian Scanlon.

"For me, as a person working in the cemetery for 30 years, it doesn't matter if there are six people at the funeral or 600," says Scanlon. "It's a box that comes in the gate and has to be lowered into the ground. And that's the way it's been with me for a long, long time. I don't really have any emotions around funerals. I have seen too many of them."

The plot in which Peter Bergmann is interred was bought by the Health Service Executive for the purposes of burying unclaimed bodies. It can take three people. There was already one other body in there, but there won't be a third.

"I have been instructed not to add anyone else in now, in case he has to be exhumed. In case anyone comes forward," Scanlon says, with professional bluntness.

Meanwhile, when mid-June turned into late June in 2009, the gardai covering the case had gradually realised two things. One was that nobody was coming forward, looking for their missing family member or friend.

The second realisation took a bit longer: that the man found dead on the beach had given a false name and address, that he had deliberately gone out of his way to conceal his identity, and that he appeared to have planned to disappear at sea in Sligo – a plan that the tides or fate or unknown circumstances had prevented.

Once it became evident that Peter Bergmann was not the dead man's real name, it was clear this was a very different kind of investigative challenge for the Sligo gardai, and their international colleagues at Interpol. It was, for instance, impossible to ascertain how he arrived in Ireland, and where he entered the country.

The name he gave did not appear on any passenger manifest, and for foot passengers on ferries from Britain, there were no identity checks.

"Normally we deal with the opposite complaint, where we have people who go missing and we can't find them," explains Ray Mulderrig, who is the current detective inspector in Sligo. "This one is different in that we have a person but we can't fully identify who he is and we can't return his body to his immediate family."

There are dozens and dozens of folders in boxes held at Sligo Garda station, detailing the thousands of hours spent on this case to date: of trying to establish the true identity of the man who called himself Peter Bergmann. At one point, there were 10 people working on the case. There are clear images of his face, both alive and dead – a face no one has yet to publicly claim recognition of.

The case will remain open until the day – if ever comes – when Peter Bergmann is finally identified and proved to be whoever he really is. He didn't suddenly emerge from some time-warp underworld in Sligo on June 12th, 2009. Nobody gets to be close to 60 without gaining friends, colleagues, neighbours, and acquaintances along the way, let alone a possible family. At the absolute least, he was definitely someone's son.

In Mulderrig's view, the entire scenario was "a deliberate act. It's not someone in a state of panic or crisis. It is someone who knows exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it."

So many questions remain about Peter Bergmann and the choices he made at the end of his life.

Why Sligo? Why dispose of all his belongings? Why give a false name and address? Did he ever post those 10 letters, and if so, who were they to? Did he intend to die by drowning? How did his cardiac arrest come on? Will anyone who knew him ever come forward?

John O'Reilly, who was the detective inspector in Sligo-Leitrim at the time, has since moved on to be chief superintendent in Cavan-Monaghan. When gardai move on, the cases they worked on stay in the jurisdiction. This one, however, travelled with O'Reilly in his head.

"It is one of those mysteries, and it has created so much curiosity and speculation in so many places over the years, including my own mind," he says. "There are so many unanswered questions that will probably never be answered, but the one I would love to get answered is, 'Who was Peter Bergmann?'"

Who was Peter Bergmann? To share information about this case, please contact Rosita Boland on rboland@irishtimes.com



Peter Bergmann in Sligo

Friday, June 12th, 2009
4.00pm: Peter Bergmann gets on an Ulster Bus at Derry bus station
6.28pm: Arrives at Sligo bus station
6.52pm: Checks in to Sligo City Hotel for three nights

Saturday, June 13th, 2009
Sometime after noon: Buys 10 stamps at Sligo post office

Sunday, June 14th, 2009
Around 11am: Takes a return taxi to Rosses Point beach from rank outside hotel

Monday, June 15th, 2009
Soon after 1pm: Checks out of Sligo City Hotel
1.32pm: Arrives at Sligo bus station
2.40pm: Takes bus to Rosses Point beach
4.00pm: First confirmed witness sighting on Rosses Point beach
11.50pm: Last confirmed witness sighting on the beach

Tuesday, June 16th, 2009
6.45am: Arthur Kinsella calls Sligo Garda station to report finding a body washed up on Rosses Point beach
8.00am: Pronounced dead at scene by Dr Valerie McGowan
8.20am: Body removed to Sligo Hospital morgue by undertakers

Wednesday, June 17th, 2009
 Autopsy performed by Dr Clive Kilgallen at Sligo University Hospital

Friday, September 18th, 2009
 Peter Bergmann is buried in an unmarked grave in Sligo Cemetery



Top left: Arthur Kinsella, who with his son Brian found the body of Peter Bergmann, on the first beach at Rosses Point on June 16th, 2009.

Top right: Paula Lahiff, who with her husband Dermot saw Peter Bergmann walking on the beach the evening of June 15th, 2009.

Left: Sligo City Hotel and taxi rank. Sign for Deadman's Point, near where the body was found. Below left: The first beach at Rosses Point.

Below: Clive Kilgallen, pathologist at Sligo University Hospital, who performed the autopsy on Peter Bergmann. 'There was no sign of salt water drowning,' he says.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAN BETSON



Weekend Review

Saturday, December 22, 2018 Editor: Conor Goodman Phone: 01-6758000 email: weekend@irishtimes.com



What not to say

The conversation-killing topics to avoid around the Christmas dinner table this year. Page 3



Nature & Outdoors

The walking festivals taking place in December and January. Page 6

In October, it was announced that a little-known Irish woman had left a remarkable €30 million to charity in her will. Rosita Boland looks into Elizabeth O'Kelly's past, to reveal a life of privilege and tragedy, generosity and anonymity

ELIZABETH O'KELLY ORPHAN AND PHILANTHROPIST



Rosita Boland

Senior Feature Writer

One day in October 1924, a young French woman who had recently been widowed took out some black-bordered sheets of notepaper and wrote a letter to her closest surviving relative – a sister-in-law in Dublin.

Alice Marie Victorine Hubert Sykes was writing from Tours, France. The letter was a *cri de coeur*. "We must be her two mothers as she has but ourselves in the world ... I am glad to feel you are there if anything happened to me ... Now don't say you are old, this must not be said. If you feel young and try to be young, you are young ... You really are the only person in the world who I could trust to leave her to..."

The recipient of the letter was Annette Kathleen Sykes, who lived at 39 Lower Leeson Street in Dublin, and was then aged 63. Her only sibling, English-born Otway Richard Sykes, was the now deceased husband of Alice Sykes. Annette had a baby niece she had not yet seen, Elisabeth Annette Alice Sykes, born on January 14th of that year, and whose second name was a tribute to her aunt in Ireland.

At the time of writing the letter, Alice Sykes had tuberculosis; an illness she correctly feared might kill her. It was this fear that made her implore her much older sister-in-law to be a mother to her baby daughter, should she not survive the infection that was virulent throughout France at that time.

Less than two years later, Alice Sykes was dead. Her daughter was brought to her aunt in Ireland; a country she was to make her primary home for the rest of her long life, all 92 years of it.

Five charities

Elizabeth O'Kelly, as the former Elisabeth Sykes was known as at the time of her death, died peacefully on December 11th, 2016 in Stradbally, Co Laois. It was only in October this year that her name suddenly blazed into public consciousness. The news emerged that she had left a remarkable €30 million to charity.

Five charities were to benefit equally from her legacy: the Irish Cancer Society; the Royal National Lifeboat Institution; the Irish Heart Foundation; the Irish Kidney Association; and the Irish Society for Autism. It was an act of personal generosity that will benefit many citizens of this country.

"Elizabeth who?" was the question everyone was asking, of this woman whose name had never been in the public domain during her lifetime.

In 1926, Annette Sykes, then 65, and unmarried, took in her two-year-old orphaned niece. It was a show of familial love that must also have been daunting, given the vast age gap between them, and the fact she had had no experience of raising children.

In the 1920s trauma in children was not recognised to the extent it is now. Today, losing both parents before the age of three, and then being moved to a different country, culture and language, would be regarded as a highly traumatic experience for a small child.

Much later in life, Elizabeth – her first name was Anglicised when she moved to Ireland – wrote a short unpublished essay about her earliest memories of Dublin. "When the French nurse handed me over to my aunt she returned to her native land, and then I had to learn to speak English as I was just starting to speak French. That set me back a lot and I did not start speaking again for several years."

At the Leeson Street house, there were staff, or "servants" as they were called by Elizabeth in her diaries. There was a cook, a parlour maid, a scullery maid, a chauffeur and a children's nurse. It was a privileged existence.

There are photographs of her as a delighted child in long plaits, holding a leopard cub and another with her arm around a chimpanzee; pictures taken at London zoo. There were piano lessons, and French and Italian lessons. There were summer visits to the Wheeler-Cuffe family at their vast Lyrrath estate in Co Kilkenny, now a luxury hotel.

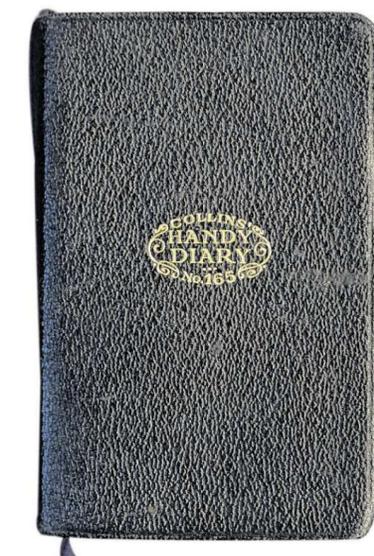
There are photographs of the chauffeur holding the car door open for her; of her among young people picnicking on parterres of various Anglo-Irish period houses; of holidaying in a number of different places abroad, her tall, thin aunt always beside her.

Elizabeth called Annette Sykes "Auntie". She had a dog called Captain who once stole and ate an apple cake she had made, and who loved to jump on to her bed, and who she walked in St Stephen's Green and Herbert Park.

She accompanied her aunt to daily Mass. Every evening, they took turns reading to each other. Elizabeth found her long wavy hair a challenge to manage, and the two of them once made a special novena together for her hair.

They frequently went to the Savoy Cinema, the Abbey, Gaiety and Gate theatres, to the RDS to hear lectures, and to the Central Catholic Library on Merrion Square to borrow books. They liked to take tea together at the Automobile Club on Dawson Street.

We know all this because after Elizabeth O'Kelly's death, it emerged that eight boxes of her papers were left to Maynooth University. They are held at the university's Special Collections and Archive section of its li-



■ Clockwise from top: Elizabeth O'Kelly, aged 30; with her aunt, Annette Kathleen Sykes; playing at the age of four; one of her diaries; her Communion day, December 5th, 1931. PHOTOGRAPHS: TOM HONAN, COURTESY OF THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ARCHIVE, THE JOHN PAUL LIBRARY, MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY.

brary, and although they are not yet available to the general public as they still have to be catalogued, *The Irish Times* was permitted to see them.

The boxes contain enough material on which to base a substantial book-length work of biography. They hold diaries, letters, estate papers, legal documents, photographs, books, and newspaper cuttings. There is an additional, smaller archive of papers, at Trinity College.

Elizabeth kept a diary more or less consistently from the ages of 13 to 20. Four of these are in Maynooth, and four in Trinity. Sometimes she wrote her diary in English, and sometimes in French.

In 1940, Elizabeth was 16. That Easter, she mused on what the priest had said at a service on Holy Thursday. "He said that everything passes and this congregation will be dead and gone in another 70 years. I wonder if I will be alive then. I am now 16 and in that time I would be 86, it would be the year 2010. I wonder if I lived to be that age if I will remember what he said ... I may be dead by then."

She was to live another 76 years after she wrote that entry.

Sad day

By the age of 17, she was attending a technical school, where she learned cookery, dressmaking and food preservation. In December that year, she writes: "Auntie and I went to the bank after breakfast and I got my first check book. Sad I think because it makes me no longer a child."

Also that month, on St Stephen's Day, a man named "Wilson" (not his real name) makes his first appearance in her diary. "After lunch today Wilson called ... had sent him to ask me if I would go to the Ward Hunt Ball tonight. I said I would be delighted. Then rushed off on my bicycle to Miss Casey to get my opera cloak. Wilson called for me at 9.30 and I had a most enjoyable evening. I did not get home next morning till 5.30."

Elizabeth went to several dances in the following year. She loved to dance, and had different evening dresses made up. One favourite was a white net dress with blue love knots. "These dances are ruining me as I think of nothing else," she writes at one point that year.

At the back of this 1942 diary on a blank undated page, she writes: "I wonder what 1943 will foretell. Will I be married? And will the war come to an end?...I keep think-

'SHE HAD TO TAKE CARE OF THIS MONEY'

Continued from page 1

ing of [name crossed out]. I hope I am not in love... I would like to put down some of my impressions but am afraid of people reading them."

Seventy-six years later, this reporter read those words in a silent library archive and felt a wrench for the young girl who had written them.

In January the following year, she writes: "Auntie and I went down town and met Wilson in Grafton Street. Auntie asked him to come to tea this afternoon and he said he would... he never turned up. I was very disappointed. It is funny to meet him today as I had made a resolution for the new year to try and forget him and put him out of my mind completely and after tomorrow I will have to start again which makes it harder."

On July 24th she wrote, "I do wish I could forget about Wilson. I made that my promise last New Year's Day but I have not been able to keep it up. I dreamt the whole of last night about him. I know I am quite mad."

Funeral

On January 14th, 1944, Elizabeth wrote: "Today is my birthday and I am 20. I feel sad. My life is passing. I have done nothing in the time. Auntie gave me a handbag and some bonbons."

Those were to be the last birthday gifts Annette Sykes, then 83, would give her niece. Less than a month later, she had a heart attack in the night, and was anointed. Nurses were engaged to attend to her around the clock.

February 7th: "I sat in terror all the afternoon... that Auntie should have another heart attack. I was terrified the whole day."

February 10th: "We had an awful night. I thought Auntie was dying. I cannot write anything about it."

February 14th: "Crowds of visitors the whole day."

February 16th: "Auntie died at 9 o'clock last night."

The handwriting for the entry of February 17th is uncharacteristically shaky and untidy. "The coffin was taken to St Kevin's for the night."

February 18th: "The funeral. I lived on my willpower today."

February 19th: "I don't remember what I did."

There are no more entries until this anguished one on March 16th: "This loneliness is terrible. It is at night time I feel it most having no one to speak to. I feel it is growing more as the pace of time grows more every day since the funeral. I miss my aunt more as time passes. It is terrible."

As Elizabeth was not yet 21, she was made a ward of court, and her guardian named as Lewis Herbert Winckworth of Westminster in London. Her aunt's considerable estate, which included ground rents of various Dublin streets, was to be held in trust for her until she turned 21 or married.

That summer, Elizabeth's diary records a large number of lunches and teas and suppers. Lords, ladies, countesses and a baroness were frequently calling to the house at 39 Lower Leeson Street; today, Angels Lap Dancing Club is located in the basement of the building.

There is no further mention of Wilson. It appears many conversations were being had between these titled visitors and Elizabeth about her future. The diary entries stop in November.

Marriage

Elizabeth Sykes came of age on January 14th, 1945 and inherited her aunt's estate. On February 9th, this newspaper carried the following notice: "The engagement is announced and the marriage will shortly take place, between Major JW O'Kelly OBE Ballygoran Park, Maynooth and Elizabeth, only daughter of the late Otway Richard Sykes and Alice Sykes, of Yorkshire."

On March 14th of that year, Elizabeth married widower and retired army officer Major John William O'Kelly. She was 21. He was 62.

The couple lived together in O'Kelly's large house at Ballygoran, Co Kildare. They took several long cruises in the following years; cruises during which Elizabeth frequently kept a diary again. Once she married, however, she stopped the practice of writing daily. The O'Kellys travelled by ship to South America, Canada, South Africa, Japan, Malaysia, and several other countries. They both travelled on British passports.

In January 1952, they were sailing to Cape Town, and had just passed the Cape Verde islands. It was O'Kelly's habit to take afternoon naps while his wife played deck quoits and table tennis and shuffle board. "There was dancing after dinner and John and I watched it. No one asked me to dance. They may have thought I did not want to dance when they did not see John dancing with me."

In January 1954, she took a three-month voyage with a woman friend to Vancouver; she did not always travel with her husband, but when she didn't, she always travelled with some female companion. "My birthday today. I am 30 years of age. Youth is gone."

John O'Kelly died in 1962, aged 80. Elizabeth was 37. She was never to remarry and, like her late aunt, did not have children. On her husband's death, she inherited a large number of stocks and shares; investments that were later to make up a substantial percentage of her donations to charity.

After his death, Elizabeth sold the Ballygoran house in 1964. She travelled for long periods to Argentina and Uganda at this time. In the late 1960s, she bought a house at Knockaulin in Leixlip, Co Kildare, where she lived for a time. She took up membership of the Kildare Archeological Society and the Irish Georgian Society.

Sometime in the 1970s she came across

Cholmeley Dering Cholmeley-Harrison. "I think they met through mutual friends, possibly through the Irish Georgian Society. They would have known some of the same people," says Fr Conor Harper.

Fr Harper is a now-retired Jesuit priest who first met Elizabeth at Emo Court in the 1970s. British-born Cholmeley-Harrison, who was married three times, had bought the Emo Court estate in Co Laois from the Jesuits in 1969.

Emo is one of the few private houses designed by James Gandon, who was the architect of both the Four Courts and the Custom House. It had been acquired in the 1930s by the Jesuits for their Irish novitiate.

Cholmeley-Harrison, a former highly successful stockbroker and member of the London Stock Exchange, also had inherited wealth. He bought and renovated the 300-acre estate and moved into the main house. Sometime in the 1970s, he rented Emo's Dower House to Elizabeth.

Emo

"Maura" is one of the few people who knew Elizabeth, Cholmeley-Harrison and Fr Harper well. She does not want to give her real name. "I wouldn't want people wondering if I was only friendly with her because I knew she was wealthy," she says.

Maura clearly recalls Elizabeth's years at Emo. "She loved the place. I think one of the reasons she rented it was because she had all this beautiful old antique furniture and they were big pieces; there's not every house you could put that furniture into. I think it was family furniture." The two of them often had tea together, and sometimes dinner.

"She was a lovely lady and a real lady, but she never spent anything on herself. She lived a very simple life," Maura says. "You'd never think she had money. I'd say that coat she had, an old tweed coat, she probably had it for 40 years. She used to go out into the grounds of Emo in the mornings and collect sticks for the fire. She never bought in bulk. It'd be a couple of potatoes, a couple of tomatoes, an onion; she only bought what she needed."

Maura says Elizabeth loved her Emo garden. In the Maynooth archive, there are albums full of photographs of the lovely garden she tended at Emo; filled with bright flowers.

One winter, when Elizabeth fell ill with pneumonia and had to be hospitalised, Maura went with her. "The nurse was talking to her, and I could hear, because there was only the curtain around the bed between us. The nurse asked who she should put down as next-of-kin, and Elizabeth said, 'Nobody'. I'll always remember that."

The diaries Elizabeth kept sporadically after her marriage were usually in lined school exercise copy books. Not being formal diaries, they didn't have pre-printed dates on them, and as she did not always date her entries, it's sometimes unclear when exactly she wrote what. But some time in 1977, when she was 53, she wrote this: "I suppose I will continue to go on the remainder of my life not knowing what I am meant to do. I have ceased a long time ago asking what I should do with my life. Life would just be too easy if one knew. I have learned to accept this."

At Emo, Elizabeth never spoke to Maura about her early life, or her years in Dublin, or about her late husband. "He was dead a long time by then," she says.

"She never spoke about her family to me," Fr Harper says. "I did know she had been made a ward of court, because of some family money. She was never boastful about her wealth. I was aware that she regularly visited her accountant and solicitor, and that she kept track of her investments, because she told me she did. She was very careful about her investments, but it wasn't for her own ends; she felt a duty that she had to take care of this money to pass it on."

As a person of devout faith her entire life, and who attended Mass daily whenever possible, she was dismayed when the village church ceased its daily Mass, due to the shortage of priests and the smallness of the community.

"So she asked me to come out and visit her, and would I mind saying Mass in the church for the duration of the visit," Fr Harper says. He did so. "The place where she lived in France was very small, and the train didn't usually stop there because it was more of a siding, but it stopped for her," he recalls. "She was a benefactress of the village, in the same quiet way she was to many others."

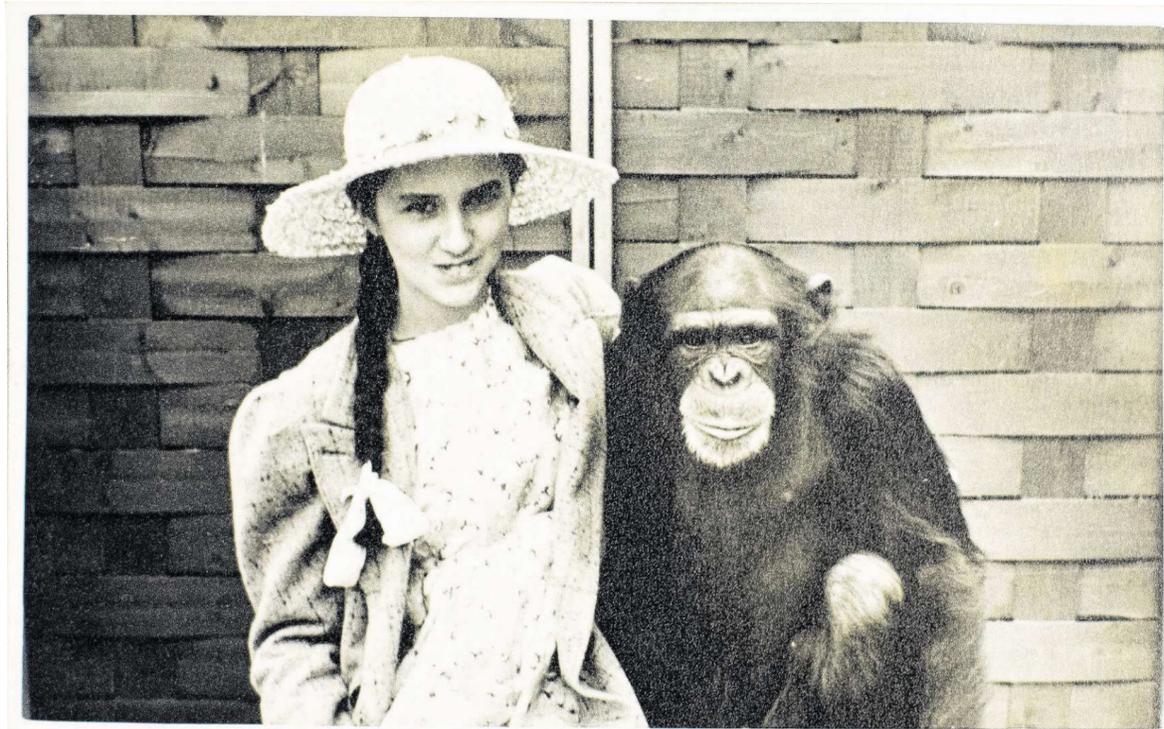
In conversations about Elizabeth, I heard stories of her generosity over the years. A new car to an old friend. A mobility buggy to an ageing friend who found it a challenge to get about. Donations for the upkeep of churches.

It wasn't just her money she was generous with but her time. She was a Eucharistic minister. She regularly volunteered with the RNLI on days when they were collecting for the public. Before Emo went into State ownership, she collected the modest fee charged to view its gardens on Sundays.

She carefully kept the copy of *The Irish Times* of 1945 which carried the notice of her engagement, and remained a reader of this paper all her life. The diary entry for her 60th birthday in 1984 read: "Bicycled when it cleared up to Portlaoise to buy *Irish Times*"—a round trip of 16km.

In the late 1990s, Elizabeth had successful treatment for cancer at Portlaoise Hospital. In January 1999, she wrote a letter to the *Leinster Express*, thanking the hospital staff who had seen through her surgery. The letter continued, "I query the reason why the oncology unit that was opened by the then president Mary Robinson in December 1994 and bears her plaque is not yet in use although there is already trained staff to man the unit? I know that this causes extreme hardship for patients who have to travel to Dublin for treatment."

In March of that year, she wrote a broadly similar version of that letter to this newspaper, adding another paragraph. "The present minister for health, Mr Brian Cowen, sanctioned cancer facilities to be set up at



■ Clockwise from main: Elizabeth O'Kelly, a delighted child with long pails, poses in London Zoo; archival photographs and diaries, kept at Maynooth University; Annette Kathleen Sykes, the aunt who raised Elizabeth in Dublin; diary entries at the time of Annette's death.

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOM HONAN, COURTESY OF THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ARCHIVE, THE JOHN PAUL LIBRARY, MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY.

ly and kind, and always interested in other people and what they were doing. But she never really volunteered any information about her own life."

Connelly had no idea her friend was extraordinarily wealthy. "I knew she was comfortable, but I also knew she had some bank shares, and we all know what happened to Irish bank shares. I did worry about her; that she would be all right as she got older, because she didn't have any family I knew of."

In 2005, the *Leinster Leader* group of newspapers was sold to British regional newspaper group Johnston Press for €138.6 million. Elizabeth had inherited her shares in the group from her late husband, who had in turn inherited them from his first wife.

At the time of the sale, she was the largest shareholder with 140,000 shares. She had been what's known as a silent shareholder; not getting involved in the day-to-day running of the business, beyond attending the group's annual general meeting.

She made more than €30 million from her portion of the shares. "Or rather, as she said to me once, it was more like €20 million when the tax man had been paid," Fr Harper says.

That December, Elizabeth anonymously gifted a sum of €3,000 to each staff member of the *Leinster Leader*; the maximum amount that could be received as a gift before accruing tax. At Christmas, she was toasted in absentia by the news staff at a gathering, who suspected their unexpected windfall had come from her, although she never publicly admitted it.

'Alady'

Elizabeth's last will and testament was drawn up on September 15th, 2008, when she was 84, one year older than her aunt Annette Sykes had been at the time of her death. Her old friend, Cholmeley-Harrison, who had left Emo Court to the State, had died in July of that year, aged 99. By then, the Dower House, Elizabeth's former home, had been turned into a café.

Less than two months after Cholmeley-Harrison's death, she signed her will with the same distinctive cursive flourishes she had displayed when writing the diaries she had kept long before, while a young girl living at 39 Lower Leeson Street. By then, her name had been published in media reports of the sale of the group. Word filtered down among the residents of Stradbally that there was a millionaire among their midst; that it was the quiet, reserved woman in her 80s, living in the distinctive house on Market Square, who always did her modest grocery shopping using a wicker basket.

"You'd know by her appearance that she was a lady," Sylvester Phelan, who owns the Grandstand Newsagent and Grocery in Stradbally, recalls of his former customer. "She always had her hair up very elegantly in a bun. It was known she was wealthy, but nobody really knew anything much about her life."

"She came in here from time to time," says Mark McDonnell, who is behind the counter at Feighery's Butchers. "We are very proud of her in Stradbally. It was an amazing thing to do; to leave all that money to such important charities. It's rare that people are so unselfish."

In her latter years, Elizabeth was attended by carers at her home, and did not go out much. When she died on December 11th, 2016, there were few people at her funeral. The book of condolence provided by the undertakers for mourners is held at Maynooth and holds the 41 signatures. She was buried at Moyglare Cemetery in Maynooth, Co Kildare, beside her late husband.

In October the news emerged about her charitable donations. "We were all shocked at the amount of her fortune," says Elizabeth Connelly. "But I thought it was just the kind of thing Elizabeth would do; trying to help charitable foundations that would benefit from her money."

Fr Harper knew that Elizabeth was leaving money to charity, but "I did not expect the amount. The reason she waited to leave her bequests is because she did not want the notoriety of making these magnificent donations in her lifetime," he says. "If she did something for you, she would let you thank her, but just once. She hated fuss. Elizabeth had the courtesy and style of a bygone age."



Podcast
Rosita Boland reads Elizabeth O'Kelly's life story aloud, on irishtimes.com/podcasts

Tullamore Hospital. The facilities are already at Portlaoise waiting to be put in use after four years' waiting."

Seventeen years later, the Irish Cancer Society was to receive a €6 million bequest from Elizabeth; their largest single donation.

Moving

It took time after Emo Court passed into State ownership for the OPW to sort out the estate, but at some point Elizabeth was given notice to vacate the Dower House there. "She would have stayed there for the rest of her life if she could," Maura says.

Elizabeth searched for a period house in nearby towns; somewhere that would not be too far from Emo. It also had to be of a size to accommodate the antique furniture she wished to have around her, some of which may have come from the Leeson Street house she occupied in childhood.

Elizabeth Connelly became a friend of hers in the 1990s. That was the decade Elizabeth bought a Georgian house in Market Square, Stradbally, 10km from Emo, which was to be her last home.

Connelly was a frequent visitor to the Stradbally house, where there were always fresh flowers. "She was surrounded by family furniture in that house, and she didn't want to change any of it. She could have made things more comfortable for herself, with say, a new sofa, but she didn't want to go out and buy anything else."

Connelly says, "It took quite a few years to get to know her, because she was quite a private person. She was so gracious, friend-

Weekend Review

Saturday, August 18, 2018 Editor Conor Goodman Phone 01-6758000 email weekend@irishtimes.com



Deirdre Jacob

How do you solve a 20-year-old crime? Conor Lally, page 3



Meet the occupiers

The pro-tenant protesters of Summerhill. Jack Power, page 4



■ Last post: Ann Gilmore (top and, left, with customers) on her post office's final day of business; date stamp for the last day (above); postman Paul Mullaney (below) drops in to collect the final mail. PHOTOGRAPHS: KEITH HENEHAN



DEATH OF AN IRISH POST OFFICE

'Another door shuts in rural Ireland': the final day of the local post office in Ballindine, Co Mayo, a community of 349 people devastated by the loss



Rosita Boland

9am-11am

It's just before 9am on a Friday morning, and I arrive at the post office in Ballindine, Co Mayo, at the moment the first customer of the day is departing. Tom Huane has already been in to collect his pension. This is no ordinary Friday, however. August 10th is the final day in business for a post office that has been in operation for as long as anyone in the town can remember. Ballindine post office – or Baile an Daighin – is one of 161 rural offices that will close over the next couple of months, as part of An Post's "consolidation" of its resources. Ann Moran has been postmistress here for the past 10 years. She comes out from behind the counter to shake my hand, just as the morning presenter on Midwest Radio reads out her words of thanks and farewell to all her customers that she emailed to the station the day before. "It's my customers that I am going to miss," she tells me. "I couldn't let the day

go without thanking them." Throughout the day, Moran greets every customer by name. She inquires, variously, after their health, the state of their hips, their children, how they have been coping with the hot weather, and whether they might make it to Knock for the upcoming papal visit. She knows everyone and, of course, everyone knows who she is. The modest interior of Ballindine post office is full of reminders of the community it serves – population 349 in the 2016 census.

There is the Expressway timetable for the route 52 bus that stops daily on the village's main street, on its way to and from Galway and Ballina. There is a sign for the local GAA lotto, currently at a considerable jackpot of €16,100. There is a notice of a 10ft x 6ft trailerful of "good dry turf" for €400. There are leaflets for the forthcoming novena in Knock around the papal visit, and several copies of the *Mayo Advertiser* freesheet.

Until yesterday, the "honey lady", Renate Klee, who sold a few jars of her honey through the post office each week, also had her home-made cards on sale here. She removed them the previous day, but four of Margaret Jennings's home-made fruit cakes at €5 each are still in a basket at the side of the counter. Moran herself has set out plates of Roses and After Eights on the counter for her customers today. Paddy Glynn helps himself to one of the Roses. He is in to buy phone credits and

post letters. "Another door is closing on our main street today," he says. "Small villages are dying. It's goodbye to rural Ireland."

Mary Higgins has come in to say goodbye to Moran. "Ah sure, it's not goodbye," Moran says. "I'll see you passing."

I follow Higgins outside to talk to her, but she starts crying, and is too upset to say more than, "I'm so sad today," before apologising and walking away in tears.

Patrick O'Connell has come in for his pension. "I've done all my business in here for the last 40 years," he says. "It's a very sad day."

A little girl in a Mayo shirt comes in by herself with a pink purse and her post office savings book. She empties a fistful of fivers and a noisy pile of coins onto the counter and lets Ann count them out for her. It's birthday money she's lodging. "I wanted to come here today, because today is the last day, and then the post office will be gone," she tells me solemnly.

Marian Brogan is posting a parcel to her son in South Africa. "There'll be an emptiness here on the street from Monday."

Maura, who doesn't wish to give her surname, but tells me she is 79, walks to the post office from her home in Ballindine. "We don't have a car, so I won't be able to walk to Claremorris post office."

Services will transfer to Claremorris once Ballindine closes; a distance of eight kilometres. "The post office means more to me than collecting a pension," she says. "It's a meeting place. And on Fridays you might go for lunch and treat yourself once you're out. This means another door will be closed on the main street."

11am-1pm

Moran inquires if I would like a tea. Or a coffee? There is no kettle in the post office, but twice a day a staff member from the nearby Borderline bar and restaurant walks down with a mug of coffee. "I photocopy their menus for them in exchange," she explains. "It's all a community effort here."

She picks up the phone and calls in two mugs of coffee.

Sure enough, some 10 minutes later, Rebecca Kearns arrives in, carefully carrying the mugs of coffee, and two fairy cake buns.

Kearns has a summer job waitressing in the bar, and is also Moran's niece. She has a modest hand-written menu with her: what's on offer today in the Borderline for lunch includes egg mayonnaise, grilled gammon steaks and battered cod. Moran makes half a dozen photocopies.

There's a small crowd of people waiting to be served. They chat among themselves while they wait; the topic is the closure of the post office.

"It's a sad day." "This shouldn't be happening." "What can we do about it?" "It's a bit late now." "Somebody wanted it closed." "They really want to get rid of the old people as fast as they can out of post offices."

At one point, Moran's mother, Kathleen

Kearns, who also lives locally, comes in to get her pension for the last time. "I have to look after the queen!" Moran jokes. Kearns is accompanied by her grand-daughter, Sarah, who videos the two of them on Sarah's phone.

Not long after that, Ballindine's former postmistress, Nora Hynes, who worked in the job for 18 years before Moran took over in 2008, arrives in. "I used to have five or sometimes six bags of post a day," she says. Moran has already told me most days it is now just one, while pointing out all the other services the post office now offers in addition to sending letters.

A man who sees my notebook initially mistakes me for a politician. "You're here too late to save the post office!" he scolds me. I explain I'm a reporter.

He tells me he is 81, but he doesn't want to give even his first name. He is very, very upset. We are standing outside on the street. He directs me to look at the red and green Mayo bunting hanging nearby. "We should have black flags up there instead today. Today is the blackest day there ever was in Ballindine. The post office was the pulse of the town. I hope whoever made the decision to close it rots in hell."

"Ann is a real lady, and helpful to everyone," Rosemary Dunne tells me; recounting a particular story of how Moran recently went out of her way to assist a confused older person with an unwrapped parcel they had brought for posting. "She is dearly loved and will be sadly missed."

Dunne was born in Ballindine and still lives here. "There were eight pubs. Now there are three. There were two hardware shops. Gone. The Garda barracks. Closed. The dancehall and picture house. Gone. And now no post office either."



Another door is closing on our main street today. Small villages are dying. It's goodbye to rural Ireland



Amy McGrath comes out of the post office crying. "Ann really is a pillar of this community, and in rural Ireland community is everything," she says to me, between her tears. "The post office is about the person behind the counter as much as the services it offers. My mother was very ill last year, and Ann always inquired after her. She is genuine, kind and compassionate. And she is a local. We will go to Claremorris post office now, and we will be strangers there."

Some of the people coming into the post office throughout the day do not have any transactions to carry out. They are coming in solely to wish Moran good luck, to thank her, to say goodbye, while also acknowledging it's not her who will be going anywhere; it's the post office that won't exist anymore.

I begin to lose count of the number of times she opens the door that separates the counter side from the rest of the post office so she can come out and give her customers a hug. Many of these well-wishers also have cards, or flowers, or gifts with them.

"The tears will come yet," Moran says to me at one point during the morning, in a rare lull in business. They've already come, is the truth. More than once, I see her ducking her head down behind the counter to wipe her eyes.

2pm-4pm

The post office closes for an hour for lunch, from 1pm to 2pm. Moran goes home to her house, and I go to the Borderline, where the menu I saw photocopied an hour or so previously is on the table in front of me.

When the post office reopens at 2pm there is a definite atmosphere of something counting down swiftly; something ultimately indefinable ending forever.

"We'll get broadband eventually in rural Ireland, but you'll never get back a post office that has closed," says Bernie O'Gara. She has come with her toddler son, Harry, to say goodbye to Moran. "I married into the village two years, and I knew nobody," she tells me.

"So I made a point of sending a birthday card to everyone I knew, as an excuse to get out of the house with the baby. Ann was my saviour. I got to know everyone in the village through chatting to them in the post office. I'd be here for 20 minutes at a time."

Eadaoin Townley and her husband, Colm Ó Conaire, have dropped in together on their way back to work.

"Ann acted as an anchor in our community," Townley says. "You could order a birthday cake and it'd be dropped into the post office for you to collect. The post office was all about old-fashioned communication. Every village needs a few focal points. This was one of the things keeping it alive."

"It's easier to go to a post office than a bank, especially when it's in your own village," Ó Conaire says.

They leave just as Stacey Prendergast and her mother, Tina, arrive in a sweep of glamour. Tina Prendergast sticks her head in the door and calls Moran out. "Stacey wants a photo," she says, and Moran

laughs and runs outside. Stacey Prendergast is all dressed up in her lovely dusty pink dress and silver shoes; her hair in a pretty updo. She is about to get on a coach at 3pm with the rest of her former classmates to go to their deb's dance in a hotel in Co Meath.

The coach can wait. It won't go without her. What's more important is that she first shows Moran her dress, and has a photograph of herself taken with Moran. "Isn't it great to be young like that, and going off to your deb's," Moran says, giving her a kiss after the photo is taken.

From time to time, I hear customers at the counter asking if "the Lotto" will be running this week. It isn't, they are told. Puzzled, I ask Moran what they mean: surely the Lotto always runs?

"We had our own bit of fun with the Lotto here," she explains. "On Fridays, when people were getting their pension, some of them would give me a euro for a syndicate for the Lotto that week. I'd write their names down, and buy the tickets. We never won the Lotto, though."

In a corner of the post office is a small round table and a few stools. This serves as a social hub for customers – not just older ones – who want to stay on and chat for a while. Many of them do.

The people collecting their pensions all say that Friday is a big social day for them; the day they go out and have the chat with everyone, do some shopping, maybe go for coffee. Or have their hair done.

"Fridays have always been a busy day for me, and I have no doubt that numbers will drop now. Those customers won't be here anymore; they'll be in Claremorris," says Muriel Costello, who has a hair salon in the village. "I think the post office closing will lead to more closures here."

Costello is chatting to Helen Morley in the post office.

"Our big gripe is that we did not get enough notice of closure that we could campaign to keep the place open," Morley says. "We only had a fortnight's notice. It's very convenient this is happening when the politicians are all on their holidays."

As the hours pass, I observe that some of Moran's customers, mainly older men, are people of few words. Yet almost all of them before they leave make the effort to find some words to express their dismay and grief at the loss of their post office, and to thank Moran for her service. It usually starts with a clearing of the throat, after they have completed their final transaction at the counter.

These are some of the things Ann Moran's customers tell her on her last day as postmistress of Ballindine post office.

"I'm sorry to see it go, I tell you."

"Good girl yourself. We'll meet again on the road."

"You were always in very good form, I give you that."

"Thank you for everything, and the best of luck to you."

"It's a shame, so it is."

"You'll be sorely missed."

"So today is the day of judgment."

"The best of health to you."

"Was it 10 years you were here? Don't

Continues overleaf



Fintan O'Toole

Why has Ireland not developed a culture of governance capable of tackling the most obvious problems? Welcome to the seven deadly sins of the dysfunctional State

Ireland is a rich, young, stable country. So why is it incapable of solving the most basic problems?

Why does the State not work? Why is it chronically unable to produce effective, timely and fair responses to social crises? Why can it not tackle a crisis of homelessness that has been building up for years?

Why is housing provision so chaotic? Why do we spend enough money to have a first-class health service but end up with waiting lists that will top a million patients this year? Why are we unable to meet even modest targets to cut carbon emissions, making us by far the worst performer among comparable countries?

Why do key infrastructure projects like rural broadband or the Dublin Metro approximate the idea of infinity? Why can we not provide children in distress with basic psychological services? And so on. Ireland is a rich country. It is a young country, with a very favourable ratio of people of working age to retired people. That young population is very highly educated. Ireland has one of the most temperate climates in the world, and even if it is not immune from the effects of climate change, it does not suffer the worst of them.

The island has been, broadly, at peace for 20 years. In its almost century-long history, the State has not been at war, invaded or seriously threatened with overthrow. Ireland does not have a large post-industrial rust belt. It is one of the most stable democracies in the world.

These are enormous advantages. So why has Ireland not developed a culture of governance capable of tackling the most obvious problems? Welcome to the seven deadly sins of the dysfunctional State:

1 Multinationals narrow the mind
The paradox of the way modern Ireland has developed is that governments can get away with failure so long as there is the one big success story. The single show that must be kept on the road is the attraction of multinational (mostly US-based) investment and we do it extraordinarily well.

But it has two negative effects – it narrows the mind and it makes it possible for the State to keep functioning as before even when it screws up very badly. Keep the multinationals happy and the rest will be grand – even when it's not grand at all. Misgovernment can be tolerated, so long as a very concentrated part of society and the economy is healthy.

The narrowness of what counts as success in the Irish economy is breathtaking: the top 10 per cent of firms account for 87 per cent of value-added in manufacturing and 94 per cent in services. So what's going on in the other 90 per cent of firms (especially the indigenous companies where most of us actually work) seems of limited importance.

For example, productivity – a key marker of economic health – looks good because it is rising in the inner core of highly successful multinationals. But this disguises the reality that most Irish businesses have actually experienced a decline in productivity in recent years.

And this is true of so many other basic markers of success. GDP can look spectacular if a handful of multinationals are shifting their capital in the right way. Just

15 commodities make up 90 per cent of goods exported from Ireland, so exports will look spectacular if those markets are thriving – astonishingly, just five firms account for a third of all Irish exports.

All of this has a huge effect on official thinking. It disconnects lived social reality from economic statistics. And it means that, so long as the bet on a tiny number of multinationals is continuing to pay off (God forbid it ever ceases to do so), there is no irresistible pressure to set other goals and meet them. The State can afford a lot of mediocrity: "ah sure it will be grand" is our motto because it is in part true.

2 Phoney political competition
The State should benefit from the fact that there is in reality extraordinary continuity of government. Every single government in the history of the State has been headed by one of two essentially identical centre-right parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. This has huge drawbacks, but it should mean at least that broadly the same policies are pursued over the long term, allowing serious and sustained structural approaches to problems. This is true in relation to what we might call the "prime directive": keep the multinationals happy.

But on everything else, the very similarity of the parties has made it necessary for them to pretend that the crowd that's in is making a hames of everything and the crowd that's out can sweep in and start all over again. Phoney competition means that the largest parties will not do what is most obviously needed – agree and implement 10-year strategies in key areas like housing, health, infrastructure and education.

3 The supreme unimportance of ideas
Even more damaging than phoney competition is the way parties with hard ideological instincts but very soft backbones swing back and forth like pendulums: movement is side to side rather than forward.

Take Fine Gael and healthcare: one of the reasons things are in such a mess is that Fine Gael had a signature policy – universal health insurance. When it came to power in 2011, James Reilly spent his whole term of office organising the system around this idea. Then, in 2014, he was succeeded by his colleague Leo Varadkar who simply abandoned the whole thing because it was too difficult.

So a system spends three years being turned around and the next three years being set adrift. Thus, for example, a flagship gesture for Reilly was abolishing the board of the HSE. And a flagship gesture for current Minister for Health Simon Harris – from the very same party – is restoring the board of the HSE. This kind of stuff is possible only in a governing culture that has contempt for its own ideas.

4 Binge and purge, binge and purge
"Feast or famine" is the Irish way. The then Fianna Fáil minister for finance, Charlie McCreevy, infamously articulated his fundamental principle in 2002: when I have money I spend it, and when I don't, I don't.



PHOTOGRAPH: PIERRE ANDRIEU/GETTY IMAGES

This sums up the apparent determination of Irish governments to prove that John Maynard Keynes is for the birds and that we don't need countercyclical fiscal policies. When the State is flush, money is often spent without even the vaguest reckoning of costs and benefits. (The recent "granny grant" proposal from the Independent Alliance Ministers is an example: costs range from Shane Ross's €70 million to Yale economics professor Cormac O'Dea's €400 million a year; benefits relative to alternative ways of supporting families are unknown.)

And when the State is broke, all the things it should be doing to support a flagging economy, like well-costed infrastructure projects, stop dead. The alternation of crazed tax breaks for developers up to the crash of 2008 with a virtually complete halt to house building in the Great Recession deepened the dysfunctionality of housing provision.

Just as there has to be rigorous fiscal discipline in good times, governments must have the nerve to continue with sensible and necessary spending when the economy is in a downturn.

5 Accountable, moi?
Every time there is a scandal, the answer is always "culture change" or "systemic problems". Cultures in public

organisations do need to change and there are plenty of systemic problems to be addressed. But the very fact that these phrases are rolled out year after year, scandal after scandal, should tell us something fundamental: nothing will change without direct personal accountability at the top.

So, for example, when the cervical smear scandal emerged in May, the Taoiseach told us that "culture change" was needed to address "a failure of open disclosure by doctors and also a failure by senior management to make sure that that happened".

This is almost exactly what Mary Harney said 14 years ago when the Michael Neary scandal emerged at Lourdes hospital in Drogheda and she promised that it "must mean a sea-change in culture... a systematic, continuous and open approach to error reporting and correction involving everyone in the healthcare setting."

Cultures change, not because they want to, but because they have to – and they have to when there are personal consequences for bad decision-making. Instead, ministers protect senior civil servants and are in turn given protection.

Tracey Cooper, who did an excellent job in establishing the Health Information and Quality Authority (Hiqa) as an independ-

ent inspectorate, told *The Irish Times* on her retirement in 2014: "The problem is we have never had any consequence so that if there is repeated system failure... Nothing really happens." She was speaking of the health service but her words apply to the entire system of government.

The 2011 Fine Gael-Labour programme for government recognised this impunity and promised to end it: "We will pin down accountability for results at every level – from ministers down – with clear consequences for success or failure. Ministers should be responsible for policy and public service managers for delivery."

Dare one ask who might be accountable for the failure to implement this accountability?

6 The myth of the market
The enthusiasm with which Irish mainstream politics embraced the new gospel of "the market" is probably down to two things: its mimicking of old Catholic social teaching and its endorsement of sheer laziness. For most of its history, the State was under the sway of a Catholic doctrine which hinged on three simple letters: for. Thus the Constitution does not say that the State will provide free primary education. It says it will "provide for" it. Anything else and we were on the road to godless Communism.

So the State provides the money and the context – but must not actually do the stuff itself. This was meant to ensure church control of health and education but morphed very easily into the new religion of neoliberal doctrine in which the profit motive must always be present. So the State not only can't control the health service, it can't build new schools (even if the companies who get the contracts to do so have a habit of going bust) and it can't build a rural broadband infrastructure and it can't directly build social housing.

Happily this also means it doesn't have to – and has someone else to blame when it all goes wrong.

7 Our low expectations
We put up with repeated failures on the national scale for three reasons. One is that, as Samuel Beckett put it, "habit is a great deceiver". We have had so few transformative moments of leadership – the Whitaker/Lemass revolution in 1958; "free" secondary education in 1967; the Belfast Agreement of 1998 – that we don't expect or demand them.

Second, and somewhat paradoxically, we manage change for ourselves. Irish society has transformed itself radically in recent decades but it has largely been a process of the State responding to and formalising change (on same-sex marriage and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, for example) rather than initiating it. So we're used to getting on with a dysfunctional State that is way behind where we are.

And finally, we too are trapped in the logic of eternal crisis management. When things keep breaking down, you really need a quick fix.

Patch it up and make do – until the next time.

Until we repent these seven deadly sins, the next time will never be far away.

66

When the State is flush, money is often spent without even the vaguest reckoning of costs and benefits

Death of an Irish post office

Continued from page 1
the years go by."

"What are we going to do without you at all at all?"
"God bless you."

4pm-5.30pm

The photographer has arrived. This last part of the day is much quieter than earlier on. Most pensions have been collected. There are some 150 social welfare payments processed every Friday in this post office, and most of them are now completed.

Things are winding down. Moran uses the time to do the paperwork she needs to get ready for the collection, and all the other final bits and pieces she needs to do. Rebecca Kearns arrives from the Borderline with another mug of coffee; the last of the

day, and the last ever she'll deliver to Moran here.

From time to time, the landline rings. It's yet another customer who couldn't make it in person, calling to say goodbye and good luck. I tell Moran it's clear to me she is a very popular member of the community. She looks up from franking letters.

"When you're in the public eye, it doesn't cost anything to smile at people," she says simply. "And the older generation, especially, really appreciate that. I have really enjoyed my job, but that's because it's the people who make it for me. And it's the people who are really going to suffer from the loss of their local post office. I know it will have a profound effect on the community."

Phil Townley, Eadaoin Townley's mother, comes in to say goodbye. "Everyone



Locking up: Ann Gilmore closes the door for the last time. PHOTOGRAPH: KEITH HENEHAN

knows Ann," she says to me. "I knew her as a child. That shows you how long I've been around."

Close to 4.30pm, a local man, Matty

Masterson turns up, camera in hand. He wants to document the last collection of post from Ballindine post office. The post box outside will remain open for collec-

66 When you're in the public eye, it doesn't cost anything to smile at people. And the older generation, especially, really appreciate that

tions at 4.40pm, but items mailed there from today will now be franked in Claremorris. Every post office has its own stamp, with which each piece of outgoing mail gets franked.

We go inside, and Moran produces the Ballindine stamp. She franks two pieces of paper for Masterson, and the inside cover of my notebook as souvenirs for posterity, with the date. Baile an Daighin, 10.8.18.

I ask what will happen to this stamp at the end of the day. It will be returned to An Post, along with all the other items to do with the day-to-day running of the post office.

The last box of mail Moran will ever get ready is waiting on the little round table for collection. Promptly at 4.39pm, An Post employee Paul Mullaney draws up in

his van. He has a few quick words with Moran, and removes a collection scanning point object from the wall. He is all business-like, loading up the envelopes and parcels in the van. Then he opens the post box and swiftly empties it.

He is gone by about 4.41pm, and although the post office is not due to close until 5.30pm, the dynamic has now changed completely. Some sense of urgency is past. The post has gone, and with it, so much else.

Gráinne O'Malley arrives in with a letter shortly afterwards, but she's too late. "The post is gone," Moran says, suddenly looking devastated. She's been smiling and cheery and chatty almost the whole day, but now she is no longer any of those things.

The photographer and myself stand outside in the street for a while, to give Moran some space. I don't ask her any more questions. I don't go inside any more. I don't approach any more customers.

Eventually, Moran appears in the doorway. It's closing time.

She carefully pulls the door of Baile an Daighin's post office out after her, locks it and walks away.

66

Every single government in the history of the State has been headed by one of two essentially identical centre-right parties