

Dermot Nally Papers

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'I wasn't answering ads in newspapers, but word does go around'

IN THE pearly light of very early morning, the young man eased himself out of bed. He dressed stealthily, making sure not to disturb his still sleeping companion. Taking his belongings, he crept out of the building and made his way to the bus-stop outside its massive iron gates. The first bus into the city left at 6.15 am and he boarded with time to spare. When less than a half-hour later, it pulled in to its riverside terminus, opposite McBride's, it was still very early, too early in those days of the Irish late Fifties, for there to be many people about.

The young man got off the bus. He paused for a fraction of a second, then he removed his black clerical hat, which he had been required to wear at all times during the previous two years. He threw it into the Liffey. Sean Donlon had left Maynooth.

He was the first of his class to leave and the method of his leaving was standard, by arrangement with the dean. "We were advised that if we made up our minds to leave, simply to get up a half-hour earlier than the others and just go. We were not encouraged to say goodbye to anyone on the grounds that it might be unsettling for those who would remain."

Donlon slipped into Maynooth from St. Finian's in Mullingar. It seemed like the logical, natural thing to do. He had been very happy as a boarder in the orderly, civilised atmosphere of the midlands school, to which he had won a scholarship. "There was a great emphasis on music and the arts."

A lot of the teachers had been to the Irish colleges in Rome and Paris and brought a broader, more sophisticated element into the school than that generally pertaining in Irish single-sex boarding schools of the time. There was also plenty of food, since the college had its own farm. "It was almost luxurious by standards then prevailing."

The boys were brought out to theatre events not only to see the professional, touring companies of the day, but also to see the school provided they were of a high standard. The highest point of Donlon's own theatrical career was a soprano performance "I was superb" as one of the three little maids in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*.

He was born in Athboy, Co. Meath. His father, also from Meath — Killybegs — had been a teacher and had risen to the rank of school inspector. His mother, from Brandon in Co. Cork had worked for the post office before the civil service marriage bar had precipitated her resignation. The couple decided that their children should read their family to be Irish speakers.

Sean was the second of 13 children and was sent to the local national school at the age of two-and-a-half. He was bright, it was true, but the reason for his early attendance had nothing to do with his brains. "My father operated on the principle of early school on the basis that my mother, who was invariably pregnant, would not have too many youngsters under her feet."

His early start meant an early finish and since he was a young boy for secondary school at ten years of age, his father tutored him at home for a scholarship to his own school. The family was based in Co. Cavan by this time and it was a Cavan county council scholarship that sent him to St. Finian's.

A number of his classmates went to Maynooth with him at the end of their schooling. "It was very tough in the sense that the spiritual standards and training were very high. The toughest thing of all was the four-week retreat every year. It was very hard to be silent for four weeks."

Spiritual regime

But in the end, it was not the toughness of the spiritual regime which drove him out but the chastity. "I was all right on the poverty part of it and on the obedience part of it — but the chastity part didn't greatly appeal." There was a particular moment when he decided that he had to leave, it was a gradual dawning that perhaps the decision to enter the priesthood had not been as deliberate as it might have been. At the end of his first year, he realised that he was required to make a life commitment. Maynooth had appeared like a continuation of school — but scholarship could not be an end. The priesthood does not.

So he left quietly and silently and did not return to visit his friends until he was well settled at UCD in the continuation of his degree in history and Irish. He is very grateful to the present Cardinal for his discretion with the college authorities. He had been on scholarship at Maynooth and if the scholarship had not been accepted as transferable to Earlfort Terrace, he would have had to drop out. Tomás Ó Fiaich arranged it.

After the order of the previous schools, UCD was like a tower of Babel. For weeks, he missed lectures because he could not find



• SEAN DONLON: for diplomats the quality of advice must be excellent, the pace of response very rapid

Discreet Charmer

them. There was no problem integrating with girls, however — "when you have eight sisters, mixing with girls or women is not entirely a novel experience."

The young man wanted to join the Department of External Affairs after graduation but would still have been too young as the age limit was 21. So he applied to the Department of Finance as an administrative officer. His introduction to the world of the civil service could not have been more civilised. His boss was Thomas Kinisla, now long gone from official service to the state, but still honouring it as a poet.

Natural extrovert

Donlon spent two years in Finance, happy enough, but always wanting to move. "It's very difficult to say what attracted me to External Affairs. I suppose I felt it was less monastic than Finance. I'm a natural extrovert and I think I wanted to work in an area which depended on establishing relationships with others. And any student of history has a natural fascination with international relations. Without going into politics in a vocational sense, it is the career that brings you closest." He started the career of his choice in 1963.

In 1964 he was moved to Bonn as third secretary to our embassy there, becoming first secretary in 1967. "And then, my first big break to my surprise. I got a letter signed by Hugh McCann, the secretary of the department, directing me to report for duty in Boston as consul general, one month hence. That really astonished me. It wasn't all that senior, but most unusual at 28. So I was delighted with that."

By that time he had met and married Paula, who had been "slightly senior" to him at the department until he redressed the balance. They had a daughter, Monica, who had been born in Bonn and Paula was pregnant again. Off they went to Boston and when their son was born they called him Brendan as a memorial to his prodigious navigating over the Atlantic.

All staff at External Affairs expected to be moved around the world. Mr. Donlon believes that this is much tougher on spouses than on the people being transferred. "The degree of adjustment is far greater for them. In the civil service, you always belong to a team and your task is done with the back-up of a system. No matter what office you work in within the Irish diplomatic or consular service, you start every morning by tearing off the telex which gives you the news summary from Ireland. The second thing you do is to read the diplomatic mail from the department — and the third thing is to read the Irish Times, even though it may be three days old."

Sean Donlon has just left the top job in Foreign Affairs, secretary to the department, to join the private sector. He talked to DEIRDRE PURCELL about life in Foreign Affairs and his heady days as Ambassador to Washington.

So it is not an enormous change and you always working with the same people. It is merely geographical.

"But spouses have no support systems or continuity. It is very difficult for a spouse to keep a career going. Secondly there is a huge problem in maintaining your identity. There is a basic decision to be made about whether your identity is an extension of the officer's or your own."

Contrary to ill-informed gossip, Sean Donlon insists that "suitability" of spouses is not an issue in the promotion of officers. "Absolutely not. Hugh McCann, the father of the modern Irish foreign service, decided that it was not a matter for the department what a spouse did or did not do. That was entirely a domestic matter."

To push the matter further — suppose a person was a candidate for ambassadorship to Britain or the US and that person's spouse was known to be a lecherous, indolent alcoholic — surely that would be taken into account in the promotion stakes?

"Never. It can't be. It would be very unfair. There is no contrast between the department and spouses. I feel I can put my hand on my heart and say that situations like that have been handled in good faith and without any discrimination whatsoever in the five-and-a-half years I've been here."

He can also put his hand on his heart, he feels, in the matter of promotion of women. The situation on paper is not brilliant — at the top there are only two women from a total of 41 ambassadors — but he points out that that is changing, albeit gradually. At third secretary level, for instance, the proportion is 25/40 men and each of those 25 women has an equal chance of promotion to ambassador as each of the 40 men. And in the case of spouses' behaviour, he insists that domestic responsibilities are not a disadvantage, even subliminally.

Wit pitting

So he pitted his considerable wits against them. "The only basis on which I could answer questions was on declared policy and very often, the types of questions asked could not be answered by reading a piece from a recent speech by the minister."

and everything a consul or ambassador says in public is on the record whether officially so or not.

On 9 August 1971, he received a telegram recalling him to Dublin. "I have no idea who spoke to whom at that time."

Well does he at least remember receiving a notice of recall and having the notice cancelled?

"I'm not even saying that."

His discretion is absolute, continuing and permanent. "Because the nature of the relationship between senior civil servants and ministers is such that unless it is based on confidence and trust, you can't do the job."

After 25 years in the service, he has something he wants to say about it and particularly about his own department. "Just because civil servants do not stand up to defend themselves does not mean there is no answer to the criticism. It simply means that there is no channel for the answer."

When a new minister is about to take over at Iveagh House, he arrives at a suite of empty rooms. "Not only are all the previous minister's papers cleared out — but all the people who worked closely with him. They sit temporarily in other rooms within the building. It is a symbolic fresh start — but more than that. That's the great strength of the Irish civil service, the capacity and neutrality to start afresh." Also the continuity of service.

The new secretary will sit down with his new minister. What sort of staff does he want — what type and how many? Does he type? Does he dictate, or write? What sort of typewriters does he like? "We assume nothing."

S EAN Donlon does assume that 24 hours a day, he is on call to his department, his minister and his country. He believes that the general public is not quite aware of the role of the senior civil servants — in particular, a chief day-to-day interpreter of our constitution. He has worn out several copies of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. He knows of no secretary who carries one around with him at all times.

"He never knows at what hour of the day or night he will have to confront it. I think secretaries of departments are probably very good at *trivial pursuit*. Very often it's the trivial which causes the problem — you spend your weekends solving problems which are certainly not of major importance, but are vital to some minister or to some citizen."

More seriously, the job involves a certain amount of sure instinct and a particular skill in being able to accumulate information, to analyse it and to hold it. His own routine daily reading involves not only the reports and documents which pour across his desk, but all the daily newspapers, and when his five years were coming to a close, he fired that trident at a few people and sat back. "I wasn't too far from the mark."

The offer from Guinness Past was the first specific one. He will live in Shannon to be near the GPA complex. He is 46. Too young as usual.

with American politics — and obviously, with works on modern Irish history.

The Irish foreign service, it he believes, among the top three or four professional foreign services in the world — and is so regarded. "It is comparable to any foreign service in the world and is an institution that has served Ireland extraordinarily well. That is recognised abroad and I'm saying this without any hesitation."

Its strength is that it is representative of Irish people as a whole. They come from all strata of society and counties. "We are not all Christian Brothers' boys, or Mercy girls, we also come from grammar schools, Jesuit schools and high schools."

The service is "small, dedicated and staffed with intelligent, very good people. A man like Noel Dorr can sit for two years on the Security Council of the United Nations — for some of that time as president — and not only hold his own but in some ways lead. Mahon Hayes has just been elected as a member of the International Law Commission." The honour accorded to our man in Geneva is not only to himself. "You don't get that based alone on your own skills — but on the reputation of your country."

The foreign service follows the flag of trade or bilateral aid and the days sit long gone when an Irish diplomat sat around in a white suit waiting for the sun to cross the yardarm. They live by their wits in a competitive cruel world, must drive dogs or muck about in African cattle projects, know how to breed ponies, understand the intricacies of Japanese protocol or how to be different — and therefore noticed — on the Washington social scene.

Donlon's own style in Washington was very noticeable. "It's not a city in the real sense, but very like an Arab market-place. It's a city where everyone, even the representative of a small country like Ireland can operate to get a result. For a diplomat it's the centre of the western world — and if you're prepared to use the advantages you have, it can be yours. There's a little bit of everything."

The lobbyist. The biggest task for an ambassador there is to put himself on the map to people who know him. On the social side, "something different is always helpful to people bored by the champagne and caviar circuit. In my own case, I thought it very important to organise the social activity in an Irish way."

This always involved much and, happily, by the end of the party, people sitting on the floor enjoying themselves with a bit of singing."

Cut & thrust

As he moves into the private sector — he has been recruited by Guinness Past Aviation as executive vice-president — he has a few things to say about his time in the service.

"I don't know yet what exactly that means" — he is not in the least worried that its thrust will be any different to what he is used to. In fact he was almost insulted by a question, asked of him when the news got out, that he had resigned. "It implies that the transition would be difficult from turgid public service to dynamic private enterprise. I don't have the impression that they are two different forms of life. In fact in my opinion, senior civil servants work at a pace which is almost unworkable."

In any crisis of security, environment, foreign policy or whatever, it is the secretary of the relevant department who jumps into action, followed quickly by his aides.

"The Air India disaster happened on a Sunday morning and the Department of Communications was in action within minutes." He himself knew within ten minutes of the killing of Private McLaughlin in the Lebanon. The pace of response has to be very rapid. "The quality of advice must be excellent — and the first thing is to possess the quality of information needed. You must know."

He has been very happy in the foreign service but said on assuming his top job, that he would only give it five years. "Anything less and I wouldn't have had a chance to put my own stamp on it — anything more and I ran the risk of staleness and inhibiting other people lining up for the job. There should always be movement."

He plays tennis and poker, (in a school where the rule is that no-one ever ever mentions his name in connection with that of any of his fellow players). He enjoys a jar and good company and his reading involves not only the reports and documents which pour across his desk, but all the daily newspapers, and when his five years were coming to a close, he fired that trident at a few people and sat back. "I wasn't too far from the mark."

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P EOPLE ultimately act as their own jailors (Freud is to be believed). But with AR Penck it was to take a more actual form. "As a soldier in the East German army, I had to fight my own crimes," he jokes.

While ostensibly defending the Iron Curtain in the 1960s, he was secretly exhibiting his paintings in the West under false names. "They'd been rejected because of alleged bourgeois decadence. So I had to become a smuggler of my own work."

Although living in the West since 1980 with his wife and two young children — an elder daughter is still in East Germany — he continues to maintain an elusive life style.

To begin with Penck is not his real name but that of a 19th century scientist he admires (his life-long fascination with cybernetics shows in the recurring use of signs and hieroglyphics in his imagery). He'll just as soon answer to Mike Hammer — after the Mickey Spillane pulp fiction hero he enjoys reading — or to several other aliases.

"They're my camouflage," he tells me. It's almost impossible to get a straight answer from him on anything. Ask him where he now lives and he'll reply: "A little bit here, a little bit there." Press him and he'll concede: "I'm looking for a place where I can live in peace with my family." Has he found it yet? "No. I'm still on the way."

Nobody seems to know for sure where he's ever going to turn up. He's the living antithesis of the stereotypical of the punctilious German. Frantic phone calls around Europe failed to locate him until a couple of hours before the opening of his exhibition at the Douglas Hyde Gallery on Tuesday night.

A 35-foot-long canvas he was supposed to have painted there — to go with his sculptures and drawings — had to be left blank until the following day.

"I need to paint in a real situation, not in a studio," he explains as he prepares to cover the canvas with a preparatory white ground. He takes off the earphones of his Walkman to talk to me. He's a small barrel of a man with a ferocious black beard, making him a natural for all these pseudonyms. He appeared in the 1970s.

"Call me an extrovert. I have to get inspiration from outside. I can't bring it only from myself. I need meetings and events. I need travelling." He erupts into one of his rumbling laughs. "Okay, so I've lost a lot of time in my life that way, but on the other hand I got a lot of inspirations."



• AR PENCK: "I need to paint in a real situation, not in a studio"

LUCY JOHNSON

IN ACTION

Unpredictable, flamboyant and a mite eccentric, international art star AR Penck barely made it to his own exhibition in Dublin. CIARAN CARTY tracked down the elusive man and got him to take off his Walkman for a little while



Wherever he goes he makes a habit of collecting odds and ends of wood which he hacks and gouges into new shapes. Cast in bronze they seem like frozen memories. "That came from a hotel in New York," he recalls, fingering a clothes hanger. Beside it is a wave-like piece of recycled driftwood retrieved from the bottom of a dangerous cliff on the West coast. "Everyone thought I was crazy climbing down to get it."

Every sculpture comes from a different part of the world — Lanzarote, Venice, France and even a beach in

West Cork — each obviously with its own story for him if not for anyone else.

"The sources of all my

inspiration are experiences from my past." He regards the sculptures, although tiny in scale, as monumental. They have the enigmatic

totem-like aura of megalithic stones. There is a sense in which his life, as much as his art, has become a kind of legend.

was as if everything he had ever known was erased.

"It was a crazy situation to grow up in. There was this confused mixture of Russian ideas and old fascist hangings. Through drawing and painting he found he could make a kind of escape from the world."

He was in the honeymoon period after the war.

"People only wanted to live and have fun and enjoy a little of life no matter how poor they were." All this was possible for a brief while. What they called the antifascist democratic epoch.

But then in the 1950s Stalinism took over. When Penck — he was still using his real name Ralf Winkler — exhibited at the Fine Art Academy in 1961 he was denounced for not conforming to the norms of official art.

He had developed an expressionistic vocabulary of signs derived from cave paintings, aboriginal art, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Roman graffiti and mathematical symbols.

"Existence, development, success and decay are all influenced by signs," he argues. Much too subversive for the communist authorities. He was forced to work at a variety of jobs ranging from newspaper deliveries to margarine packing while going underground as an artist, smuggling his paintings out to the West through the post or with friends.

After military service, he took up a separate career as a jazz pianist. "Everything had become very dangerous. I thought becoming a public person would make me safer." Later he became a drummer with a progressive rock group. "We were very much into the aesthetics of music. Looking for new tones and structures. Everyone thought they were Mick Jagger."

Meanwhile AR Penck was gradually becoming established in the West as a major international artist, taking part in Documenta 5 in 1972 and other prestigious shows. With the gradual easing of restrictions in East Germany this clandestine life became an open secret with the authorities. "Eventually they just kicked me out. Then he adds mockingly: "I became a commercialised artist."

He'd always wanted to make sculpture but couldn't because it was too awkward to smuggle out. Even in the West he's not altogether free to do what he wants either. Commercial restraints apply. "Everything has to be on a small scale. In Germany it's impossible to make public sculpture. Probably the only way will be to buy some ground of my own and build things up there."

If not in Germany, perhaps in Ireland, he's always been drawn to the ambivalence of the stone spirals and ogham markings. "Maybe I'll build a new Newgrange for Ireland," he jokes.

Then he puts his earphones back on the order to finish the painting.

With the opening up of communism under Gorbachev, he doesn't see any reason why he should return to East Germany. "Perhaps as an old man I'll go back to Dresden and look for my sister."

A movie with a fair share of bite

MICHAEL DWYER reviews *The Mosquito Coast* which opened in Dublin this week

ARGUABLY the most serious sin of omission committed by the voters for next month's Academy Awards has been the total exclusion of *The Mosquito Coast* (Savoy 2, Dublin). A haunting, intriguing and powerful picture, it inexplicably failed to secure a single Oscar nomination in any category.

This inordinate lapse can be traced to the uneven critical reception accorded the film in the United States towards the end of last year. Most appraisals found a problem with the film's uncompromising structure — the dramatic crescendo came too early for those accustomed to and expecting conventional treatments. American reviewers and public alike seem to have taken exception to the film's unflattering cynical picture of their country. Compounding all these difficulties was the movie's inherent pessimism.

The voice of that pessimism and, it transpires as the enthralling narrative develops, the source of great pessimism himself is Allie Fox, the volatile, vocal and heroic of *The Mosquito Coast*. Played with passion in a broad, touching performance by Harrison Ford, he is a frustrated inventor, deeply disillusioned with living in a land where, as he puts it, people buy junk, sell junk and eat junk.

"Look around, Charlie, this place is a toilet," he hectors his eldest child, the movie's young teenage narrator impressively played by an assured newcomer,

CINEMA

River Phoenix. Impulsively, Allie Fox decides to quit America and his job on an abandoned farm in New England. Taking with him his subjugate wife (the excellent Helen Mirren) known to the entire family as Mother, along with his two sons and young twin daughters, he sets sail from Baltimore for a new life in Central America.

Even more impulsively, he buys a small town named Jeronimo up river in Honduras, and stubbornly closing his eyes to the area's dilapidated features, he sets up home for them and builds a monument to his obsessive, foolish ego — an enormously elaborate and utterly superfluous re-making machine.

As Fox's follies grow impetuously and inexorably into his own form of Murphy's law, he prescribes his perceived role as powerful patrifamilias. The man who loudly purports to break with traditions clings to the traditions which appeal to his narcissistic nature, and the contradictions in his character burst through the surface.

Parallel to these unsettling revelations regarding its apparently self-sufficient post-Sixties alternative protagonist, the movie itself, which in its early stages operated as a great, sweeping adventure of purgation descends into the darkness of the heart and mind, into a whirlpool of



• HELEN MIRREN and Harrison Ford (right) in *The Mosquito Coast*

self-deception, fraudulence and betrayal.

This provocative, discomfiting drama marks yet another inquisitive and imaginative exploration of ostensibly confident characters thrown out of their depth, willingly or otherwise, into alien, potentially hostile environments for its accomplished Australian director Peter Weir. It follows logically from, and extends his treatment of this theme in earlier films such as *Picture on the Wall*, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and, most

recently, *Witness*.

The Mosquito Coast reunites many key members of Weir's *Witness* team, and justifiably so. They include not only Harrison Ford, but lighting cameraman John Seale, editor Thom Noble and composer Maurice Jarre who seems to excel when he's working for Weir. The screenplay, adapted from the novel by Paul Theroux, is the work of the gifted Paul Schrader whose concise treatment has irked admirers of the original source. Not Paul Theroux, though — he is one of the movie's staunchest defenders.

Also new in Dublin this week are *That Was Then, This Is Now* (Carlson) starring Emilio Estevez who also adapted the movie's source, a novel by Susie Hinson, author of *The Outsider* and *Rumble Fish* for the screen. And Arnold Schwarzenegger is an ex-FBI agent going undercover in *Raw Deal* (Ambassador), directed by John Irvin.

Turle Diary has yet to be released.

Next Sunday Michael Dwyer reports from the Berlin Film Festival which opened this weekend.

A somewhat tinny sound at the National Concert Hall

IAN FOX reviews the Dublin Philharmonic at the NCH and three other recent concerts

THE Dublin Philharmonic was formed last autumn and consists of 17 of our best-known string players. It gave its first of three 1987 concerts in the NCH last Sunday evening under the baton of its founder, Ethna Tinney.

One of the programme features was to have been the work of an Irish composer. Before the concert Miss Tinney announced that, because she had mis-timed the length of the programme, the Irish work (John Kinsella's *Two Pieces for String Orchestra*) would have to be held over to a later date.

Pretty insulting for Mr Kinsella. I would have thought, and doubly so in that she retained an incredibly boring Cantata by Scarlatti which we could well have done without. This was sung in a bright piercing tone by Belfast soprano Irene Sandford, usually a fine performer but definitely badly off-form with copious wrong notes. The two Cavalli arias and Handel's *Volsen* omere would have been quite enough.

The second half of the programme was a performance of Khachaturian's evergreen *Piano Concerto* 47 years ago. Her youthful spirit and powerful playing belie the passage of years. While the Khachaturian could hardly be described as the most profound of pieces, which I am sure the composer never intended it to be, it is anything but unimpressive. It would take an incredibly stuffed shirt or unrelenting musical snob to fail to give in to its hectic, late-romantic thrills.

The increase from only four to 17 strings did not



• ETHNA TINNEY

create enough of a difference to produce a significantly new sound and as the playing was competent but dull and very un-Schubertian, the exercise really seems to have been futile.

How different matters had been on 11 February when Maura Lympany lifted the spirits with one of the best performances of any concerto that I have ever heard. It is incredible to realise that she actually gave the first London performance of Khachaturian's effervescent *Piano Concerto* 47 years ago.

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Colman Pearce ended the concert with a fine *Enigma*

Variations and began the evening with a fascinating *Angava* by Lidholm, work, *Kontakion*. In all a most attractive evening and a barn-storming performance from Miss Lympany which will echo in my mind for a long time to come.

Patricia Byrne is a young New Zealand pianist who emigrated from Ireland with his family when he was only six. He proved himself to be an attractive if a trifle studious performer in the *Grieg Piano Concerto* the previous Wednesday.

Albert Rosen brought all his accustomed vigour and bloom to the RTE *Symphony in Martin's* fine *Sixth Symphony* and Seoirse Bodley, as really splendid *Symphony* No. 2, a work which has stood the test of time since its premiere in 1960.

The programme was rounded off by a swaggering romp through Richard Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel*. *Lustige Stiche*, marred only by an uncontrolled blast in the chaise case who should have met a similar fate to Till.

Back then to last week and the RDS where we heard the 1985 winner of the International Young Composer Competition, cellist Caroline Dale, who earlier had won the BBC TV Young Musician of the Year for the age of 13. She is a really fine player, a natural 'cellist with a big rich tone, a great musical enthusiasm and a total mastery of her instrument. With the young Australian pianist, Peter Lang, she gave thrilling and tempestuous readings of the Shostakovich and Franck *Cello Sonatas*.

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