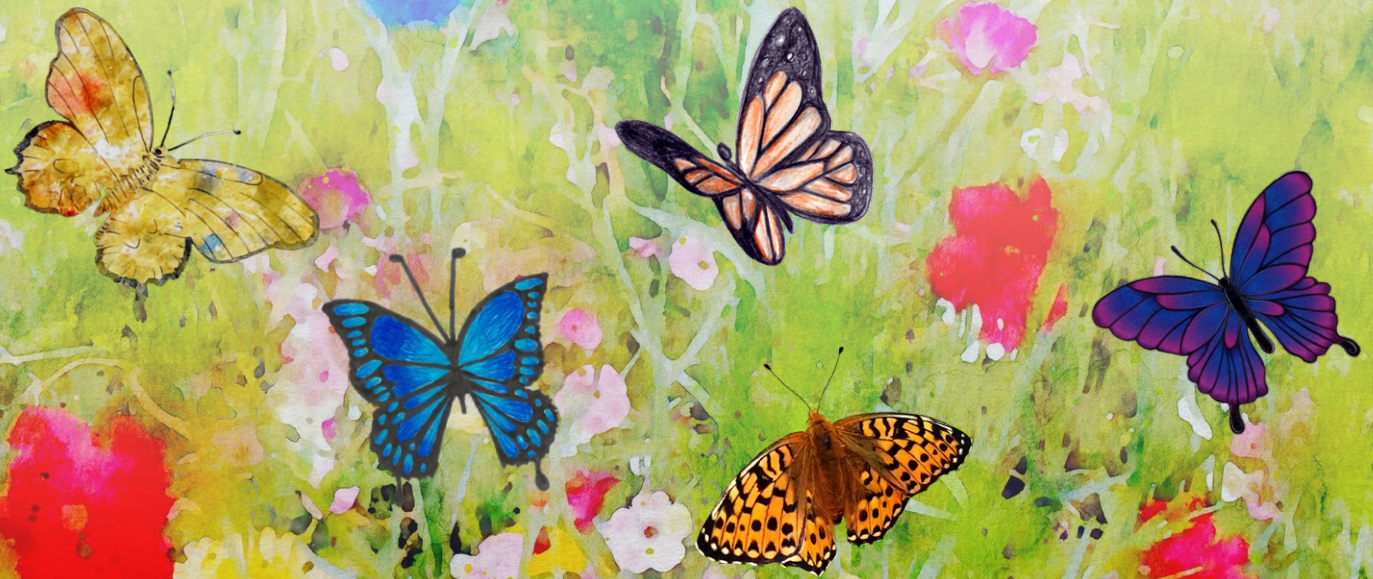


Our Lived Memories



Five women's journeys in
stories, poems and photographs



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Five women's journeys in
stories, poems and photographs



Mary Rowan Foley



Nora McGillen



Joan Reid Moffitt



Rose Jordan



Barbara Monks Charleton



Sligo County Council
Comhairle Chontae Shligigh

Sligo.

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LIBRARIES



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Arna chomhchistiú ag
an Aontas Eorpach
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Adult
Literacy
for Life





From left to right, Nora McGillen, Barbara Monks Charleton, Mary Rowan Foley, Michelle Brennan Executive Librarian Sligo County Library, Joan Reid Moffit Adult Literacy Tutor and Family Learning Co-ordinator MSLETB and Rose Jordan.

Our Lived Memories

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Foreword

Sligo County Council welcomes the Adult Literacy for Life 10-year strategy which will help all adults develop their literacy skills and become fully active citizens in our communities. The support of SOLAS through the Collaboration and Innovation Fund is gratefully acknowledged.

Sligo County Council wish to congratulate Sligo Library members who participated; Mary Rowan Foley, Rose Jordan, Nora McGillen, Joan Moffitt, and Barbara Monks Charleton. This unique personal collection offers invaluable insights and perspectives into creating living memories to share with families and friends.

The *Our Lived Memories* project documents the engagement of the group working together while also realising their full potential as individuals. The assistance of Joan Moffitt from MSLETB throughout the project is acknowledged.

Sligo County Council wishes to acknowledge the contribution of writer Maeve McKenna in editing the booklet accompanying the project, combining a narrative flow and mix of genres, while maintaining the core essence of the collection. We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of photographer Carl Brennan.

We would like to thank library staff for their support to communities, in becoming informed, connected and literate.



Councillor Dónal Gilroy
Cathaoirleach
Sligo County Council



Mr. Martin Lydon
Chief Executive
Sligo County Council

Preface



I was delighted when Michelle from Sligo Library invited me to edit *Our Lived Memories*, a book that evolved from a series of workshops held in 2024 under the *History in a Box* project. These sessions, facilitated by Joan Moffitt and sponsored by the MSLETB, brought together a group of remarkable participants whose stories form the heart of this book.

Traditionally, I thought of editing as the act of refining—correcting grammar, tidying prose, and presenting a polished final version. Having had two poetry pamphlets published, I've seen firsthand the meticulous work editors do to shape raw drafts into finished books. But I've since learned that editing is much more than technical polishing; it's an invitation into another's world—a gift of trust and shared creativity.

I approached this task with excitement and deep gratitude. It is always an honour to work with writers, whether in my role as workshop facilitator, a first reader for friends, or simply as a fellow traveller on this writing journey. With that spirit, I began reading and editing the drafts from the five participants.



What I hadn't anticipated was how profoundly moving each person's story would be and how deeply the act of writing about one's life can resonate with a reader. Each piece struck a chord. Though our experiences are uniquely our own, they echo common themes—love, resilience, loss, joy—reminding us of our shared humanity. Exploring these five wonderfully rich stories and poems, I found my memories grew more vivid. It was an unexpected and much appreciated reading experience.

The book includes a wonderful mix of prose and poetry. This mix of genres enhances the reading experience, allowing different textures and tones to emerge. Certain themes thread through the collection. Clothing, for instance, often evokes a strong sense of time, place, and emotion, linking past to present in subtle but powerful ways.

There's also a rich historical undercurrent throughout the work. In both Joan's and Barbara's stories we read of the Marriage Bar, and Mary recounts the practice of women being 'churched,' important recollections of restrictive practices and an indication of how far we've progressed as a country.



Traditions, rituals, the influence of church and state, and the economic realities of past decades are woven into these narratives. They offer important context, not just nostalgia, but remembrance, not just history, but heritage.

Reading each of these contributions, I was struck by the role of parents, and the immense love that defined these families. Despite the financial hardships many faced, their lives were rich in affection and care.

You'll read of Mary's buttons and the threads that weaved a pattern through her life, and how the craft of restoring and recycling was a part of everyday life. And her vivid memories, like the group of elephants on the mantelpiece or her mother's handbag stored safely in a wardrobe for many years, bring the past to life. As a reader, I was instantly transported back to my childhood and recalled many cherished mementos of my parents kept by myself and my siblings in later life. Mary's poem, *Still Unfurling*, speaks to the continuing journey of these women, the next chapter of their lives, and how each new day we are 'becoming.'

Nora's poetry is deeply affecting. Each poem is a tribute and is delicate, lyrical, and rich with metaphor. In *Photograph*, I found myself shedding a tear, so vividly could I picture her father holding her eldest brother, unaware of the tragedy that lay ahead, and Nora on her mother's lap in her ankle-strapped shoes, her mother's breath on her cheek. The final line lingers with haunting beauty.

Rhododendrons is a masterful portrayal of loss and grief, themes that feature in much of Nora's writing here. Across ten poems, we travel the breadth of Nora's life, and what a treasure that journey is.

Joan guides us through the streets of Dublin and into her father's shop, where their close bond shines warmly. Her rich descriptions of the city's old buildings offer not only a historical snapshot but also intriguing facts. And who, as a child, wasn't terrified by turkeys hanging in shop windows before Christmas! As Joan reflects on the many cherished moments shared with her father, it's clear that their relationship left a



deep and lasting impact on her life. Her extended family—siblings, aunts, grandmothers—are also portrayed with affection, each one contributing meaningfully to her personal story. Joan’s passion for inclusive adult education is powerfully echoed in her writing, adding yet another layer of richness and purpose to her narrative.

Rose offers a delightful glimpse into rural Irish Christmases of the 1970s. The ‘Wran Day’ is described in exquisite detail. Her use of local colloquialisms adds authenticity and charm. Though Roscommon and Dublin are worlds apart, her story reminded me of my own childhood Christmases—longing for things we couldn’t afford. Her detailed descriptions of Christmas decorations, most handmade, and her triumphant purchase of jeans with money earned on Wran Day is unforgettable. As a reader, we are delighted at her defiance, and we share her pride at finally achieving a long-held dream. These small victories speak to the resilience needed in those times of great need.

Barbara’s stories are full of grace. Her memories of being carried on her father’s bike and walking with him through Hazelwood Forest are tinged with tenderness and strength. And the glimpse of Barbara as a child sitting under the table, watching her mother go about her household chores, the love and care of a parent so evident. Her journey to New Zealand to visit her daughter and grandchild is described with such warmth and sensory detail that the reader is almost accompanying Barbara on her trip. Her words exude a quiet peace that nourishes, a healing presence on the page.



My role as editor of this book has profoundly moved me, leaving a lasting impact. I am in awe of these women—of their strength, their courage, and their voices. Though each has shared a deeply personal story, together they weave a tapestry of our collective experience—a shared reality, a communal passage through life. This deep connection we forge through words allows us to reflect on our own journeys, fostering empathy and understanding. Each narrative not only entertains but also invites us to explore the complexities of our own lives, shared experiences that bind us together.

As you delve into these narratives, you will reclaim your story. Turning each page, you’ll discover not just the journeys of the five writers, but also the echoes of your own dreams and struggles, waiting to be unearthed.

I believe you will cherish this book as I do. Within these pages, you’ll likely hear echoes of your own journey—as significant and worthy as those told here.

—**Maeve McKenna**

Background

In 2024, as part of Bealtaine Festival, Sligo Libraries collaborated with MSLETB on a three-part workshop series entitled *History in a Box*. These workshops were facilitated by Joan Moffit, Adult Literacy Tutor and Family Learning Co-ordinator MSLETB. Sligo Library members joined the workshops, coming together as a group to share their personal histories, using mementos, photographs, trinkets, and letters. Their tangible items sparked engaging conversations about family, childhood, and lived experiences both in Ireland and abroad. Participants created a personalised box to hold their items and to share with their loved ones.

When the workshops concluded, it was clear participants had shared in a unique experience and that the project had more to achieve. Funding received through The Adult Literacy for Life Collaboration and Innovation Fund in 2025 supported the realisation of this next phase of the project. The *Our Lived Memories* project was co-ordinated by Sligo Libraries in collaboration with MSLETB.

This publication brings these memories to a wider audience, while showcasing new skills learned by participants throughout the project, in using publishing and design tools to bring their stories to print. An exhibition of participant's personal items in Sligo County Museum, and a video collage of the project process, will augment this publication.

It was an honour to be amongst the incredible women on this project; Mary Rowan Foley, Rose Jordan, Nora McGillen, Joan Moffitt, and Barbara Monks Charleton, who shared their personal stories so generously.

Each decision during the project was agreed as a group, including appointing an editor to weave the various stories into a cohesive narrative. Writer Maeve McKenna has done an extraordinary job curating mixing genres and themes, while maintaining each contributor's integrity.

We hope you enjoy this tapestry of stories, woven together and perhaps will be inspired to create your own lived history.

Michelle Brennan

Executive Librarian

Project Co-ordinator

Mary Rowan Foley



*The beauty of a butterfly
is the courage she had
as a caterpillar
to transform, evolve
to be all
that was designed
for her to be.*

Curiosity has always been my compass, guiding me toward deeper layers of the self, others, and the world. I'm drawn to the quiet magic of soil, the scent of herbs, and the feel of weathered objects in my hands. I ask, what else might this be? What story still lives here? My life has unfolded across many landscapes: nurse, midwife, mother, business owner, reflexologist, acupuncturist, and now artist/writer.

Each role is a thread in a tapestry woven from care, connection, and curiosity. I trained in nursing and midwifery, then earned diplomas in Health Education, Counselling, Reflexology, and Acupuncture. A work/study trip to China deepened my learning.

In 2008, with a knapsack and my husband at my side, I set off on a 109-day journey through Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. At the heart of this journey was a return to Broken Hill, where I lived as a child, a trip rooted in memory and meaning.

That time awakened something freer and wilder in me. Later, in my mid-sixties, I received a First-Class Honours BA in Fine Art. Art became a language of touch and memory. I collect, repurpose, and reimagine, exploring time, presence, and story with materials and objects. My connection with nature, including organic food growing, feeds my soul. Poetry now walks beside my art, letting thoughts move, silence speak, and questions breathe. This project, 'Memory in a Box,' feels like a home for all of this.

Held with care. Still becoming.

Still Unfurling

this memory box of mine holds pieces of all
I've seen—
fragments, fibres, scraps of time, stitched from where
I've been

but don't let it whisper that the
story is done, as if silvered hair
means the setting sun.

each morning I wake
with the soft stretch of becoming still in my bones—
a creak, a sigh,
and low, familiar groans.

yet still I unfurl,
like a fern in the light drawn
not by duty but by quiet
delight.

curiosity stirs,
gratitude glows and glows.

—*Mary Rowan Foley*



Threads of Memory

I responded to a flyer advertising a four-week workshop on creating a memory box. That first morning—running late and flustered—I quickly grabbed a few items. Wrapping some delicate, shiny shells in tissue paper, I placed them into a shoebox alongside a handful of buttons, a clump of threads, some yarn, and a photograph taken over seventy years ago. At the last moment, I remembered my nursing badge and an acupuncture needle and popped them in too. This will have to do for now, I thought.

Five women gathered in the back room of the library. After registering, we introduced ourselves and briefly shared the objects we had brought. As we handled them, memories, sensory and emotional, came rushing in. It was as if we had opened a kind of Pandora's box. The conversation flowed.

We were connecting.

The objects were more than mementos; they were keys—tangible tools for unlocking memory. As we explored their textures, colours, and stories, deeper reflections on life, relationships, and our sense of self began to emerge.

My recollections didn't arrive in any tidy chronological order. My mind—what I fondly call my 'grasshopper artist mind'—leapt from one scene to another. The items I'd hastily gathered were triggering, directing, and stirring foggy memories, reawakening something long dormant. The handful of tangled threads I brought spoke volumes. Once part of curtains and other fabrics, they carried the kinks and creases of a former life. I had carefully unravelled them, captivated by their colours, curious about what might still lie ahead for them. They became a metaphor for resilience and reinvention, qualities I've come to understand deeply over my three score and ten years (and some!).



As I handled the threads and yarns, I recalled the bold, terrifying step of enrolling in art college in my sixties. I abandoned myself to creative pursuits, learning through touch, play, and experimentation. I know how important novelty is for our neural connections. That season of my life was both thrilling and daunting—an opportunity to express something that had long waited within.

Threads led to more threads. I began thinking of how the lives of others become the warp and weft of our own woven stories. If I hadn't taken that first step into a part-time course, I'd never have met the people who encouraged me toward college. So many stories are interlaced, don't you think?

Then the shells from Kerry brought me back to my mother.

In the late 1960s, my mother opened a small shop selling baby clothes, handbags, craft supplies, and haberdashery notions—everything needed to create, mend, and make do. There were boxes upon boxes of buttons, with sample buttons sewn to the lids for display. She would spend ages helping someone find just the right button to transform a hand-me-down cardigan or coat. I remember her mending a young man's jumper and only charging him for the thread. She had known scarcity herself and simply liked to help.

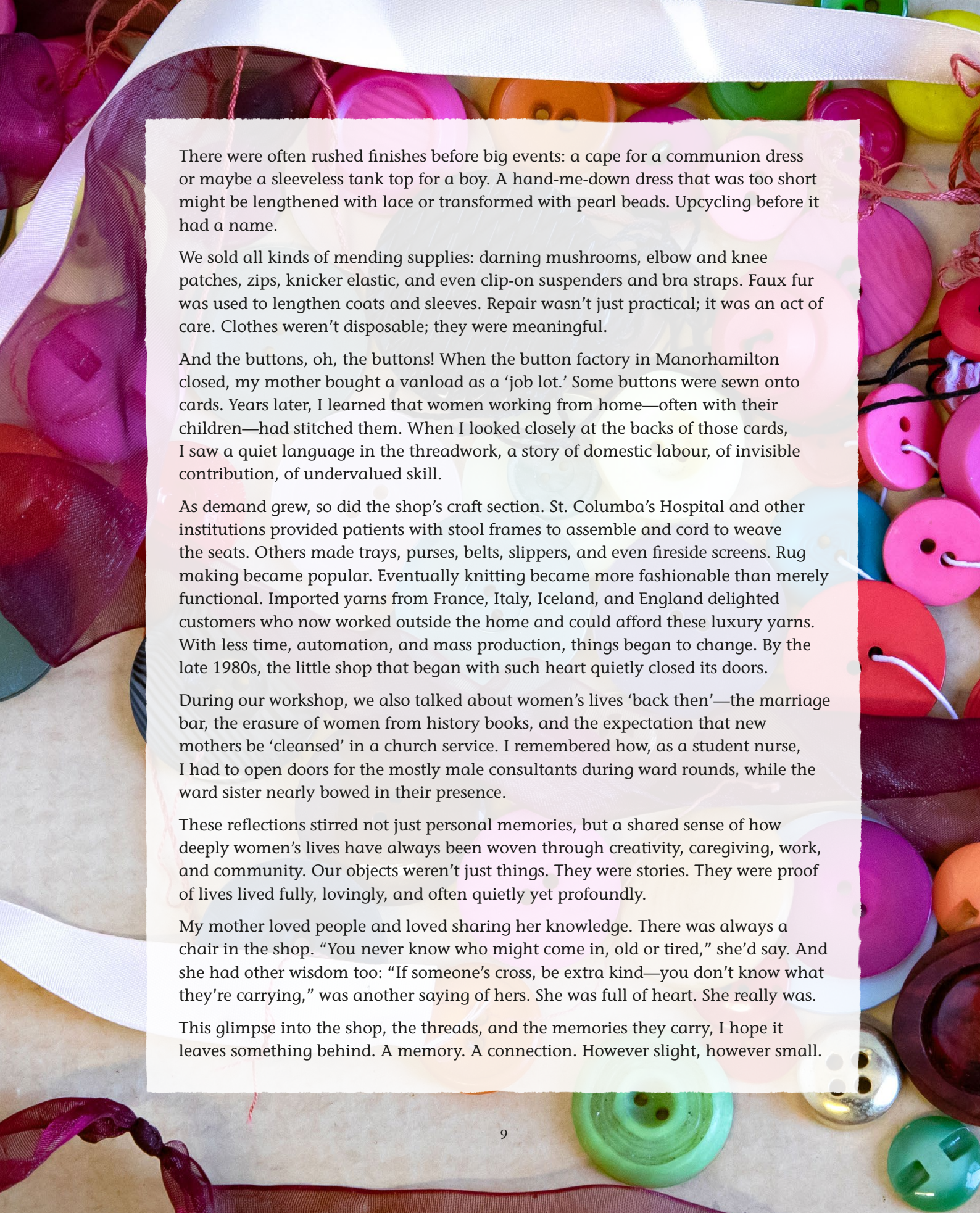


My mother Lil Rowan in her shop in Castle Street

When she fell ill, I stepped in to help with the shop, leaving my nursing career. Eventually, my husband and I moved the shop to a larger premises and ran it for over twelve years. It was more than just a shop. It was a place of conversation, creativity, and connection. If those walls could talk, they'd tell stories of lives unfolding, of love, loss, hope, and everyday resilience.

Customers came in for wool to knit garments for babies, communions, confirmations, and special occasions. Money was scarce. Most of the women were homemakers, so we introduced a system where wool was 'laid by,' put aside under each customer's name to ensure there was sufficient yarn to finish their projects. It meant we saw them often and got to know their stories. Choosing a pattern, the yarn, and finally the perfect buttons became a kind of ritual.





There were often rushed finishes before big events: a cape for a communion dress or maybe a sleeveless tank top for a boy. A hand-me-down dress that was too short might be lengthened with lace or transformed with pearl beads. Upcycling before it had a name.

We sold all kinds of mending supplies: darning mushrooms, elbow and knee patches, zips, knicker elastic, and even clip-on suspenders and bra straps. Faux fur was used to lengthen coats and sleeves. Repair wasn't just practical; it was an act of care. Clothes weren't disposable; they were meaningful.

And the buttons, oh, the buttons! When the button factory in Manorhamilton closed, my mother bought a vanload as a 'job lot.' Some buttons were sewn onto cards. Years later, I learned that women working from home—often with their children—had stitched them. When I looked closely at the backs of those cards, I saw a quiet language in the threadwork, a story of domestic labour, of invisible contribution, of undervalued skill.

As demand grew, so did the shop's craft section. St. Columba's Hospital and other institutions provided patients with stool frames to assemble and cord to weave the seats. Others made trays, purses, belts, slippers, and even fireside screens. Rug making became popular. Eventually knitting became more fashionable than merely functional. Imported yarns from France, Italy, Iceland, and England delighted customers who now worked outside the home and could afford these luxury yarns. With less time, automation, and mass production, things began to change. By the late 1980s, the little shop that began with such heart quietly closed its doors.

During our workshop, we also talked about women's lives 'back then'—the marriage bar, the erasure of women from history books, and the expectation that new mothers be 'cleansed' in a church service. I remembered how, as a student nurse, I had to open doors for the mostly male consultants during ward rounds, while the ward sister nearly bowed in their presence.

These reflections stirred not just personal memories, but a shared sense of how deeply women's lives have always been woven through creativity, caregiving, work, and community. Our objects weren't just things. They were stories. They were proof of lives lived fully, lovingly, and often quietly yet profoundly.

My mother loved people and loved sharing her knowledge. There was always a chair in the shop. "You never know who might come in, old or tired," she'd say. And she had other wisdom too: "If someone's cross, be extra kind—you don't know what they're carrying," was another saying of hers. She was full of heart. She really was.

This glimpse into the shop, the threads, and the memories they carry, I hope it leaves something behind. A memory. A connection. However slight, however small.

Away and Home

I was nine years old in a new home, new school, and new town. I loved doodling in the margins of my copybooks. Always the same images: a great ship riding squiggly waves, flying fish leaping alongside, and an octopus, sometimes with its tentacles wrapped around the ship. Occasionally, I tried drawing a kangaroo with a joey in the pouch, never a cottage, a donkey, or a dog, like my classmates.

I told my classmates I had been around the world. That's why I drew those pictures. One day, the girl behind me tapped my shoulder. "Have you ever been to Collooney?" she asked, a small town just a few miles away.

"No," I admitted. I hadn't even heard of it. "Aha," she said, triumphantly, "then you couldn't have been around the world." I never mentioned my journey again.

But it was real.

I was just five when my family returned to Ireland after living in Broken Hill, Australia, for four and a half years—seventy years ago. Ten pounds bought an adult ticket for a one-way passage to Australia on the 'Ten Pound Pom' Scheme, officially the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme, a post-war initiative to grow Australia's population and workforce. My parents, in search of a better life, boarded the *Esperance* in Southampton in 1950, leaving behind the stresses of my dad's work in the RUC.

My memories of that time are like a collage: our stilted house with its wide veranda, blistering heat, and the huge spider my terrified mother tried to kill with a soaked rag. All of us laughed when she dropped an egg and it fried on the blistering ground.



My mother, two brothers and me in Broken Hill with an aboriginal family circa 1952.



Tony and Lil Rowan, my parents in Broken Hill.





*My mother, me and my siblings on board the SS Moreton Bay Ship
with some crew and passengers.*

We sang Danny Boy, Waltzing Matilda, and The Wild Colonial Boy. The mining town of Broken Hill is one of Australia's most isolated towns and unbearably hot. As children, we thought it was because of the heat that the earth was red!

When Queen Elizabeth came to visit in March 1954, the town was buzzing with excitement. I remember running through our garden, stick in hand, beating the grass to scare off any snake that might be lurking there. I was so excited to get a glimpse over the wall of the big royal parade.

In 1954, disaster struck. My dad was unable to work following an accident. There was no family to help, and not everyone was welcoming of newcomers. It was as if the relentless, intolerable heat was scorching our dreams. And so, that year, we set off on the *SS Moreton Bay*, homeward bound.

The six-week voyage home was full of colour and wonder. I remember Port Said in particular. As we crept through the Suez Canal, a flurry of small boats swarmed around our ship. Egyptian traders, dressed in flowing robes and red fez hats with long black tassels twirling in the breeze, added to the spectacle. From our passenger deck, I looked down in awe. I was small, one day off my fifth birthday, but I felt enormous above the scene below.





Voices shouted. Passengers pointed. A makeshift pulley system was rigged to haul goods aboard. My mother haggled and came away with several fezzes, a beautifully tooled leather handbag, and a set of six black elephant ornaments. The shouting, laughter, and fun as all the crew and passengers celebrated crossing the equator and that day we docked in Port Said are imprinted in my mind.

Only one elephant remains with me now. It sits on a shelf in my home. My brothers and sister have the rest. When we were growing up, the full set had pride of place in our sitting room. I loved moving them about on the shelf, making up little stories of the elephant family. They were proof I had been around the world!

The fezzes are long gone, but the leather bag survives. It lies wrapped in a pillowcase at the bottom of my wardrobe. Pale beige, embossed with colourful Egyptian scenes, its clasp is rusted and stiff, and when opened, a faint musty scent slices through time, unlocking entire rooms of memory. That scent reminds me not just of those days, but of everything that brought us there and everything that led us back home.

It's hard to believe that seventy-five years ago, ten pounds each for my mother and father brought us on a journey across oceans, a chapter of life on the other side of the world, memories that still sail through my mind.



Nora McGillen



Nora McGillen has lived in Sligo all her life. Her work has been published in New Irish Writing in the Irish Independent and the Irish Times, in Poetry Ireland, Cyphers, Force 10, The Cormorant, and the Leitrim Guardian. She has also been published in The Lonely Crowd, The Atlanta Review and America (USA).

Her poems have been awarded prizes by the Dún Laoghaire International Poetry, Allingham Festival, Boyle Arts Festival, and National Women's Poetry, and shortlisted for the Hennessy Awards in 2014 and 2016.



The Knife Sharpener

In memoriam Patrick Flynn

I want to keep a space of you,
a small part of that unquenchable light behind your eyes,
that speaks to me of courage.

I want to hold your hands stained with nicotine,
and the old sores of winter, the black of coal dust,
the clay of fields that have entered the bone,
where the comforting breath of a horse lulled you to sleep.

I want to wash your feet,
ravaged by stones where the toenails have blackened,
and calluses have formed,
from a time when you walked a thousand roads,
pushing a small blue machine to sharpen knives.

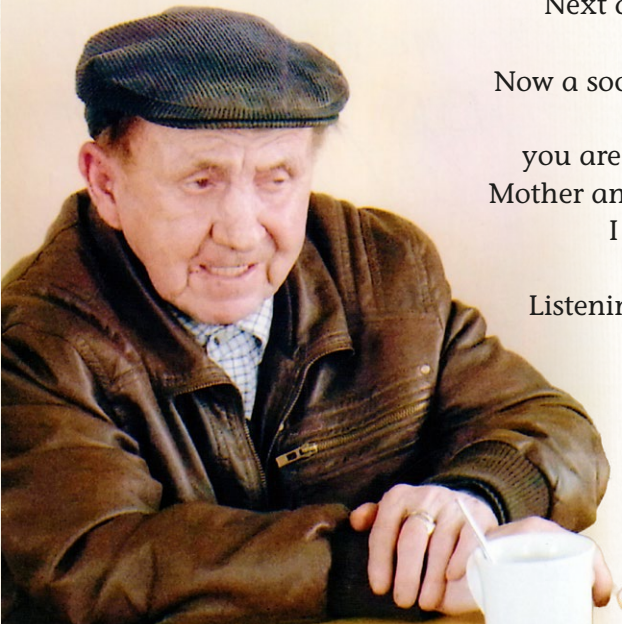
I want to touch your memory shackled underneath
the deep scar on your forehead,
a hammer blow from your father
when you were nine years old.

I want to stop your memory
at a bridge outside Roscrea where the stones weep,
and your mother rests in a pool of blood,
and your father is hurrying along the shivering road
to drown your brother, and the trees stock still,
and angels coming from Roscrea town to save him.
Next day he is given away.

Now a soothing memory has crept into your brain,
a small boy in a strange town,
you are walking home alone from the cinema.
Mother and father are coming proudly to meet you.

I want to take that walk with you
and make it last forever.

Listening to your breaths and the starry night
bending down to shelter you,
leading you safely home.



The Sharp Knife

In memoriam Kitty Dunphy

The brown handle had faded so that
marks of hands shone in the wood like fading stars.
The steel blade glistened,
an early morning mist over the fields
as your small hands carefully cut the white soda bread
and a rare treat on the kitchen table,
the shivering slices of cheese.

You laid lino too with the same knife,
cutting and fitting with an alchemist's precision on the uneven cement kitchen floor.
The remnant of red carpet that covered the stairs and cradled our bare feet,
you cut into place with patience and prayers.
The Sunday roast, I can taste it still, pink juices running wildly,
as your knife generously cut.
And that night your voice thrilling and strange,
anointing the house with 'She Moves Through The Fair'
and the knife on the top shelf resting, and something in us being awakened.

You made our coats, our First Communion dresses,
bending to the gentle weary hum of the sewing machine, I see you still.
Or awakening in the night,
hearing your hushed breath whisper a prayer over us.
In the morning our gleaming shoes laid out,
new soles carefully cut into place, not a mark of the knife visible.
Everyone came to borrow it, ours was the only sharp knife on the street.

You made clothes for neighbours, too.
A mother's shabby coat meticulously transformed
into a child's coat, the knife snipping away the buttons, and finally revealing the inside
out, pure and perfect as a peacock's plumage, a godsend for Sunday Mass.
A wedding hat, its lace veil transforming a threadbare life
shone radiant under the wings of your hands, or the small child swaddled in smocked
dress, stepping with wonder into the world.
Sometimes they couldn't pay, but you never once complained,
'Every hair on their head is counted,' you would say.
You cut away our fear, whittled our grief, mended our hearts,
implanted patience, poured in truth, made us brand new.
You are gone now and we cannot find the sharp knife.
But its sheen is here somewhere inside us.



*Mrs. Kitty Dunphy and her daughter
the late Patricia O'Hara.*



The Toolmaker

In memoriam Martin McGillen



It was the tools brought you to mind
on a damp day in Castlebar.
Seeking shelter in a pound shop,
I find them arrayed in rows of gleaming chrome,
and you cutting through memory.

The tool room was your chapel.
There you cut and moulded steel,
the mutant shapes transformed under your steady hands,
the noise blasting your inner ear,
the flashing lights exploding against your retina.
There was no other way to earn your living.
They lie now subdued, some encased in pigskin bags,
their sharp points excavating memory
and I see you running through the meadow field,
or going obediently to school on dark winter mornings,
your wellington boots skimming the puddles.

Your first dance, your first love, I was there unknown to you.
I rummage in memory and twenty years on you shuffle
towards me, clutching the wall.

I linger by the gleaming objects unable to name them.
Reaching out, I touch them reverently,
their cold surfaces landsliding in me.



Photograph

In memoriam Peter, Agnes and Brendan McGillen



This is my father in the picture.
I cannot remember him like this, he is younger than me.
He is holding my eldest brother tightly, he doesn't know he will lose him soon.
My brother does not look at the camera.
My mother holds me upright upon her knee, a chubby toddler in ankle-strapped shoes.
Her breath is upon my face, soothing as a sea breeze.
In vain, she coaxes a smile from me. She is full of joy.
My father's black, wavy hair gleams. He gazes confidently into the future, I cannot warn him.
It is a summers day and we sit on a garden seat.
Daisies are pushing their heads through wavering grass.
All through childhood this picture hung on the dining room wall,
as familiar to me as my own hands.
Now both the hands and the photograph make strange with me.



Rhododendrons

In memoriam Agnes McGillen

Here in Connemara, I let you go. Rhododendrons purpling the landscape,
their Lenten glow igniting the bog, turf stoked and stacked,
a benediction of whitethorns over the road.

At Our Lady of the Wayside, I light a candle for you,
the muffled tones of the Mass bell, in my chest,
the knowledge you are leaving.

Light breaking through stonewalls, Rhododendrons trembling at that
place near Kylemore where we picnicked.
Remember how I gathered armfuls of them.
Rhododendrons waiting whichever way we turn,
their sturdy gaze unflinching, breathing the salt tang of the wind like
ether, knowing they will return
here again and again.

Rhododendrons crouching along the mountainside.
A dappled grey mare and foal circle round us,
their hoofs beating time with my heart.
May I not hear them,
the blossoms falling silently away.

Rotting boats railing against
the harbour at Letterfrack.
A statue of the Virgin mute amongst the rocks
and the stone silence of rhododendrons
seeping into clay.

Rhododendrons lighting our way into Clifden,
glimmer of eternity in the falling blooms,
Rhododendrons breathing a path into Clifden,
that you and I might return and find them
still blooming.

*Agnes McGillen with
her Grandson Aaron*



Home

In memoriam Bobby Sands



I longed for my mother's face,
her soft breath soothing the darkness.
I died on the 66th day at 01:17a.m.
Everything I have put safely away.

The hum of rosaries emanating from the cells,
the slippery sound of the guards laying the tray,
the curlew's wing stricken against the window.
Weight of my eyelids, weight of the blanket, grief of the fields.
My last breath soaring the walls,

Whitethorns like apparitions whitening the hedges.
Mother waiting in the kitchen,
light of day breaking in her eyes, carefully buttering the brown soda
bread and spreading the honey.
The kitchen clock ticking, I am home.



Parting

In memoriam Marian Breen



I am cleaning presses, rubbing polish into the wood in circular motions.
Here the wood is worn, ridged, void, the smell of polish brings you to mind.

The trees are swelling out over the avenue, only a few leaves have fallen yet.
I remember you walking away in my tweed coat.
Your image wells up from a discarded handbag
or the frayed leaf of a blue notebook,
or a chiffon scarf tainted with tiger balm
or an African sculpture mute on the sitting room window.

I remember Saturdays polishing the wooden floors.
I would wax, you would shine plans that took my breath away.
The silent ticking of the house,
a pot of homemade soup overboiling on the stove,
your words luminous on the shimmering surface.

The rain is lashing the window.
I hold your picture in my head—wisps of red hair,
face bone white, your words a skin I cannot peel.
Like a blessed icon, I return to it again and again,
polishing your faded image repeatedly in my heart.



Stone Walls

In memoriam Peter McGillen

White bones of frost on the grass.

The roads glistening blue-white,
gaunt trees pushed back,
a clean sweep of snow glowing over every hill.
Scrawny sheep nibbling peacefully,
two ponies lying in a field of gulls.

The walls on every side now,
sea-scuffed, salt-scalded, snow-burned.
Light pouring through stone,
oozing slowly through cracks.

I remember how you loved the stone walls,
Oughterard, Roundstone, Ballyconneely, Clifden.
Holy places from my childhood.
How seldom we went there.

You who rose every morning at 3a.m.
kneeling to murmur Hail Mary's in the hushed kitchen with a coaxed
kettle, and the breath of the Sacred Heart lamp keeping vigil.
Before facing the star-hammered sky
and the bent uneven roads laden with darkness leading to fairs.

The bellowing of cattle and the anguished silhouette of the horses,
rough-coated, head-bowed, heart-locked.
These you bought and sold that we might live.

And when everything was taken away from you,
words, walk, the power to hold a cup to your lips,
the light of stone walls still glimmered far back in your eyes.



Horse at Strandhill

In memoriam Gerard McCarthy

I see her outline
in the rain drenched field, where the grass falls,
and the stone wall bows.
I call her—'Becky, Becky,'

and she turns and walks towards me,
and a whinnying cry echoes over the field,
drowning out the seas hollow thunder.
Her eyes look at me,
the deep brown sockets stung by sea breezes
and all the grief is mirrored there,
like the year was rung out
and thrown on the wet field.

A year has passed since you went away.
I think of her waiting by that gate,
pacing the field listening for the steady sound of your boots
and your breaths couched in wonder,
and her loneliness impenetrable.
Now the wind howls in the stone and she walks me slowly away,
holding her head high.

When I turn back to call her name there is silence,
and then the whinnying sound begins again.



Horse at Strandhill
artist Tristan Cryan, age 13.



Ballyconneely

In memoriam Gerard McCarthy

You said, "Don't waken me,
leave me at Ballyconneely.'
I remember the leaking tent,
the scorched sausages,
the sound of the wild horses' hooves,
the way I loved you.
The commonage swaddled in salt spray,
the poor family living in a kind of shed nearby,
the old schoolhouse peering out to sea,
the waves shining the beach.
Now, I no longer hear your breaths
rend the room,
or see the two crosses that wait upon the windowsill,
or the deep sockets of your eyes
that close on memory.
Instead, I see you in the blue currach
battling the waves telling me 'Everything will be all right.'
And the salt taste is still raw on my lips,
as it was on the first day.





Brenda Gallagher Cryan



Tristan, Oisín and Cillian Cryan



Joan Reid Moffitt



“One’s life has value so long as one attributes value to others, by means of love, friendship and compassion.”

—Simone de Beauvoir

I am an Adult Literacy Tutor and Family Learning Co-ordinator with Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB). I am delighted to be involved in this project which was conceived from the Family Learning *Memories in a Box* project, which I facilitated in 2024.

My main passion in life is teaching. In my story I will bring you on the journey I’ve travelled to achieve my dream to teach. As a tutor, I try to practice the humanistic method and tailor my lessons to suit the practical needs of my learners. I am the Literacy Tutor for Rehabcare in Sligo and would like to mention my learners in Rehabcare from whom I have learned so much.

I enjoy cooking, dancing, being creative and travelling, especially to Italy.

My bio is somewhat intertwined with my story, and I dedicate these memories to my six very precious grandchildren—Georgia Grace, Emily, Sophie, Josh, Chloe and Luke who I love to spend time with.





My story begins when I arrived into the world on the 23rd of August 1959, at the oldest continuously operating maternity hospital in the world—the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin, founded in 1745 by Bartholomew Mosse.

My father, Arthur Reid, owned a grocery shop in Cabra that was established in 1934 by my grandmother, Harriet Reid (nee Dunne). In 1957 he married my mother, Dorothy Watts, who worked as a secretary for Captain Shaw at Clover Meats in Limerick. My mother was a typical woman of her generation; she had to give up her career because of the Marriage Bar. (The bar was eventually lifted in 1973.)



Granny Reid



Me with my parents Arthur and Dorothy Reid





Arthur Reid in the shop



Arthur Reid with children Joan, George and Yvonne

At Family Learning, we believe parents are a child's primary educators. When I reflect on my childhood, I realise how true this is. From an early age I was involved in my dad's business, and to this day I believe it is where I got my education. My dad was my first and foremost educator.

We packed our own blend of tea. I remember the weighing scales and preparing the brown paper bags with the red labels. Daddy would bang the bag on the counter to level the contents while I was casually learning about pounds and ounces. I used a pricing gun to individually price each item on the shelves that I was able to reach, making sure to put the labels to the front. Literacy and numeracy without my awareness. I was no more than ten years old when I used the wind-up till, and at the end of the day I counted the money with Daddy, writing out the lodgement slip and going to the bank with him. I learned about pounds, shillings and pence, and had to make sure that notes of the same value were all together with the front of the note facing up. To this day, I keep them like that in my purse.

I was the eldest child in the Reid household. My brother George was born in 1962 and my sister Yvonne in 1963. I was about four when I was dispatched to the shop to be minded and became my dad's lapdog.

Before we went to the shop, morning duties sometimes started with a trip to Dublin's Victorian Fruit & Vegetable Market (opened in 1892 and sadly closed in 2019). As an adult, when I passed the market, the aromas always reminded me of the wonderful times I had with my dad. The noise, the liveliness of the place, the banter, and the gifts of fruit being pressed into



my little hand by the dealers. I liked to watch the horses resting as the carts were unloaded and they ate bruised fruit and vegetables, sometimes out of orange boxes. Daddy would caution me not to slip on the squashed produce on the ground. This adventure often included a visit to Wacker's Pet Shop on Parnell Street or a bakery. Byrne's Drapery Shop was a few doors down from our shop. Daddy often bought me clothes there to support his neighbour, so I came home from the shop wearing a different outfit than the one I'd worn that morning.

In 1963, I started school at Blaquiery Bridge School in Phibsborough. The school was built in 1825 by Sir John Blackquiere. The building is still there despite being deemed unsafe to operate as a school in 1969. I then went to the 'Ink Bottle' school in Glasnevin. In 1706, Sir John Rogerson, a wealthy Dublin merchant, raised funds for a school in Glasnevin that would be built on the site of the Old Bull Ring, which dated back to the 14th century. Sir Rogerson stipulated that the school should be built in the shape of an ink bottle. *"Out of the ink bottle comes ink—ink is ideas put on paper. We need ink bottles,"* he said. Dean Swift pledged the sum of £40 to the building of the school. The school I attended replaced the ink bottle-shaped building, but it has retained the name to the present day.

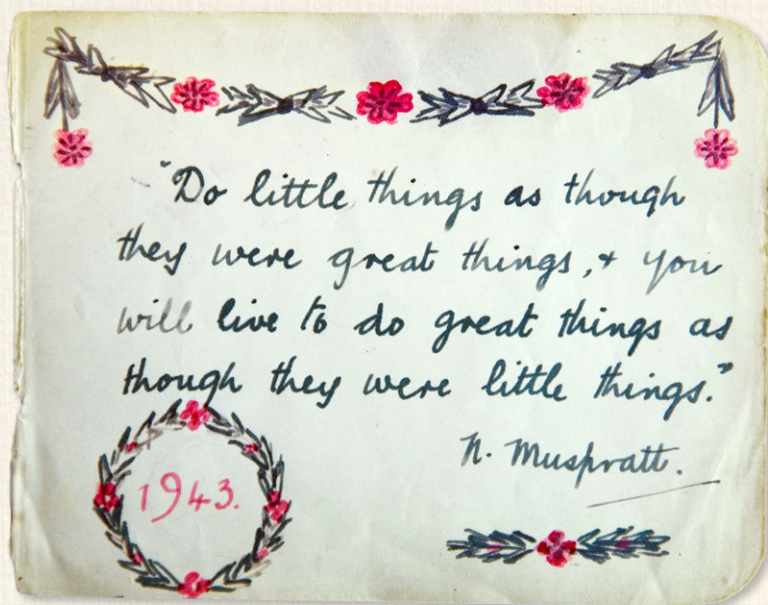


The move to the Ink Bottle meant the Department of Education allocated me a bus pass, which

I carried in my school bag in a Café Crème Cigar tin to keep it from getting wet. It was at the Ink Bottle school that I knew I wanted to be a teacher. Mr. Atkinson was the headmaster and an amazing teacher. I remember him bringing us to the Botanic Gardens and getting us to take our desks out to the yard for lessons when the weather was good.

"Teachers are heroes in the life of a child."





Through my work, I regularly meet people who've had bad experiences in school; they have been left with scars affecting their ability to learn, so it is important to remember the good teachers. In 1943, my mother, on leaving primary school, was given a piece of paper from her teacher with a quote: "Do little things as though they were great things, and you will live to do great things as though they were little things."

I found this quote in her dressing table after she passed away.

I attended Bertrand & Rutland High School on Eccles Street for the first part of my secondary school education. It was an all-girls school. I still remember the green gabardine coat with the school crest and the beret. When I got my gabardine coat, it was down to my ankles so I'd get the duration of secondary school out of it. That was not to be, as the Department of Education had me on the move again. The school closed following the amalgamation of Bertrand & Rutland and Mountjoy & Marine School in 1972, and from that, Mount Temple Comprehensive School was formed. I was given another bus pass!

The Mater Private Hospital is now built on the site where Bertrand & Rutland High School stood. Mount Temple Comprehensive School is on the Malahide Road, and, as I write, the school is in the process of being completely rebuilt. It was a very different school from Bertrand & Rutland, even though I had many of the same teachers. There was no uniform, a better range of subjects, and male peers!

My experiences in both schools were positive, and in hindsight, I am so glad I experienced both models of education. Mount Temple was the school where the rock band U2 formed in 1976. All four members are former pupils of the school. Bono was in my year!



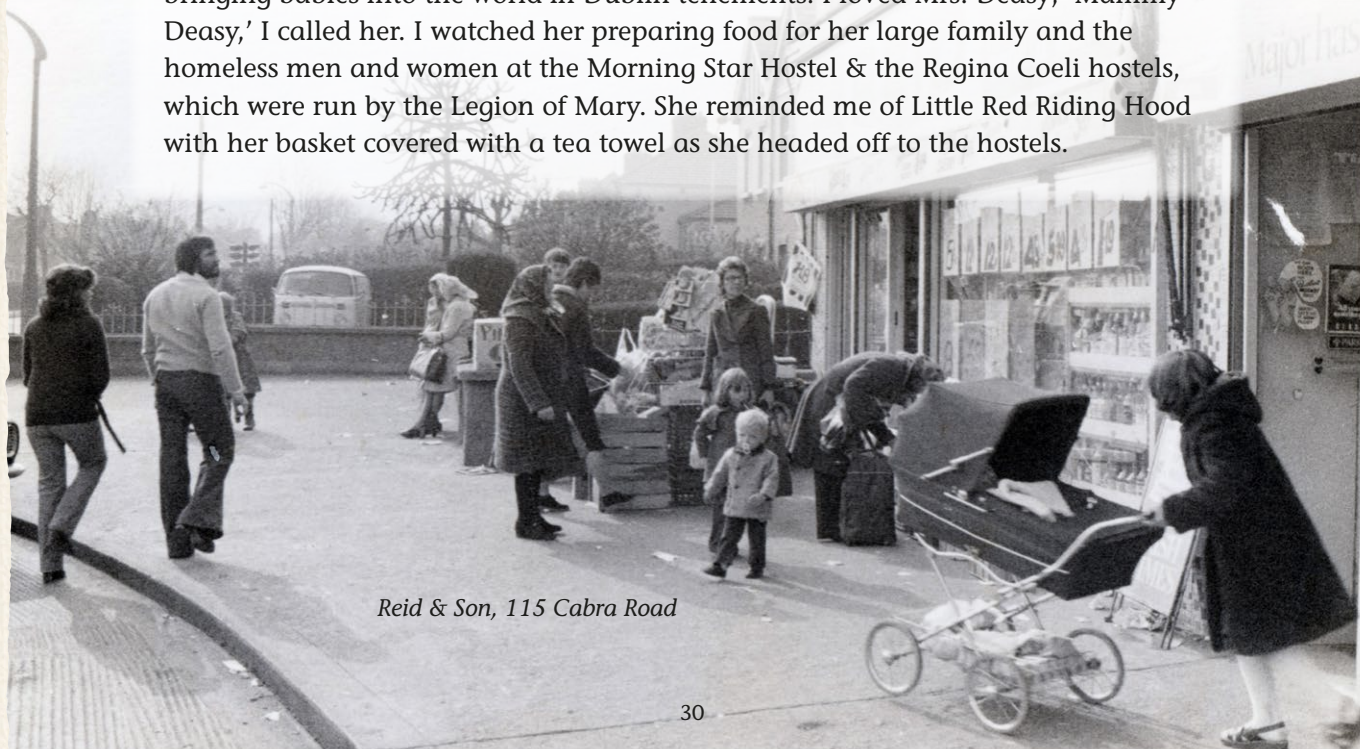
Initially, our shop had a big, high counter, and Daddy and Jack worked behind the counter; you only saw their heads and shoulders adorning their shop coats. They reached for the items requested by customers, and they did their totals on the paper bags. I remember the big red meat slicer that I knew not to touch. In the 1970s this all changed when the shop was renovated and became a self-service mini-market. This change saw the introduction of self-service refrigeration. Up to that point, Daddy and Jack had to go into the cold room for the perishable items. I watched Daddy cut tobacco, cut toffee, and slice ice-cream into portions, propping wafers at both ends. The customer could choose how much they wanted to spend on their ice-cream. Biscuits were sold loose from a clear-topped tin, and eggs were sold loose also.

Daddy gave customers' children sweets and broken biscuits, and that was a huge treat for them. There were a lot of large families in Cabra with one wage, and people found it hard to make ends meet.

The one dread I had in the shop was at Christmastime when turkeys hung from the bars on the roof window. I feared bodily fluids from the turkeys would drip down on me. Good customers got a big red candle as a gift at Christmas. Most of the customers were in a Christmas Club; they saved up all year for Christmas. We had two notebooks on the till, one for tab or credit (people paid when they got their wages) and the other notebook was for the Christmas Club. VAT was added to the end of the receipt; now I was learning percentages.

I went into the house next door to the shop, where Mrs. Deasy lived. She was a midwife and delivered babies in North Dublin and had many a story to tell of bringing babies into the world in Dublin tenements. I loved Mrs. Deasy; 'Mammy Deasy,' I called her. I watched her preparing food for her large family and the homeless men and women at the Morning Star Hostel & the Regina Coeli hostels, which were run by the Legion of Mary. She reminded me of Little Red Riding Hood with her basket covered with a tea towel as she headed off to the hostels.

Reid & Son, 115 Cabra Road





Dublin Zoo



Daddy had a membership card for Dublin Zoo, so we went there very often. I remember him with his camera taking pictures of me with the animals. In those days you could get a ride on the back of the elephant, watch a chimpanzee tea party, or feed some of the animals. We often fed the ducks in the Dog Pond in

the Phoenix Park. This pond was formed on the 31st of May 1941, during WW11, when a German bomb exploded there and formed a crater.

On a few occasions we went to Butlins on our holidays. There were lots of activities for children, and at night parents could enjoy an evening out while babysitters in blue uniforms patrolled the chalets on bicycles, ensuring that no little one was left distressed. Changed times!



Butlins Beaver Club

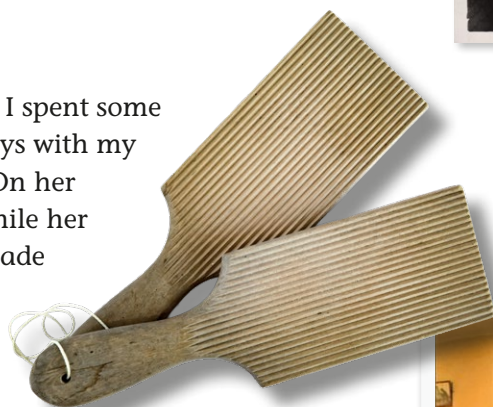


Granny Watts lived in Limerick. She was a significant figure in my childhood. She wrote to me, and when I learned to write, I wrote back to her. She sent me all kinds of items in the post—clips, brooches, purses, a tin with dahlias on it, and the one thing I remember was her sending me a clothes brush, which I still use today. Granny was a music teacher and an organist, so unlike most women at that time, she had some money of her own. She brought her grandchildren to the Stella Café in Limerick. I can still remember the tiered plate of cakes. Granny would say, *“You can have what you want, but don’t waste it.”* She had a lovely smile and wore red cherries on her coat.



Granny Watts

From the age of nine, I spent some of my summer holidays with my Auntie Peg in Laois. On her farm I sat with her while her sow had bonhams, made apple cake for the hayfield, and made country butter with her. Pouring the cream into the wooden churn, churning at a steady pace for anything up to an hour. The pungent smell, draining buttermilk, washing the butter, draining it, and placing it in a large enamel bowl. We used the butter pats to get rid of excess buttermilk and then added salt before weighing it into moulds then wrapping it in greaseproof paper. After a while in the fridge, it was put in the basket on my bike, and I delivered it to the neighbours who ordered it from her.



I saw how frugal people were then, especially in rural Ireland. Flour bags were made into tea towels, and socks were darned using a darning mushroom. Collars were turned on shirts when they were worn.



Auntie Peg and me



I went to music lessons with Ms. Quinn on Annamoe Road, and I was a member of St. George's Girls' Brigade. I went to Irish dancing at the renowned Peter Bolton School of Irish Dancing. The Feiseanna were held in the Mansion House, and I won several medals in the Leinster Feis. My costume was made and embroidered by a neighbour, Norah Watters. I was a youth leader with The Girls' Brigade for over forty years and know that the training I received through this youth organisation helps me in my role in MSLETB.



From an early age I wanted to be a teacher. My favourite childhood activity was playing school with my toy blackboard. My unfortunate siblings and their friends were often subjected to my 'lessons' in our garage. Unfortunately, when it came to my Leaving Certificate, I didn't gain the marks in Irish required to go to Teacher Training College. At that time there was no mention of going back to school to repeat a subject, despite the introduction of free secondary education. Most of my peers had left school to start working after the Intermediate Certificate, so I was privileged to be able to stay on and sit my Leaving Certificate.

My mother encouraged me to follow her career and become a secretary. I did a secretarial course at Littledale's Secretarial College on Harcourt Street. The subjects were typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, and French. My first job was as a junior secretary at a legal firm, Hayes & Sons, on St. Stephen's Green. This building is now the Little Museum of Dublin and is well worth a visit.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, if you got a job in a bank or insurance company, you were meant to be set up for life, so we were sent to sit exams for these establishments by the Secretarial College. I had settled at Hayes & Sons and was very happy there while continuing to do night classes and exams at the Secretarial College. Within a few months, I was promoted to personal secretary to one of the solicitors, which I was about to accept when a letter offering me a position at General Accident Life Assurance Corporation put me in a dilemma. I changed jobs and worked in the Claims Department at the insurance company.

Despite the stability and financial perks of the job, I decided to move on and worked for some time at a stockbroking firm and then got a position as personal assistant to John Kenna, Director of Transport & Foreign Trade at the Confederation of Irish Industry (CII). I feel very privileged to have worked for a number of years with this lovely man in such a prestigious flagship organisation. CII merged with the Federation of Irish Employers (FUE) in 1993 to become IBEC, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation.



I married in 1983. Our wedding reception was held in Sands Hotel in Portmarnock. The menu cost less than €15 per person! Our photos were taken in the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, across the road from where I went to school. In 1987, my father-in-law needed help in the family business, so we decided to move to Sligo. I was very apprehensive about leaving Dublin, my good job, my friends, and city life. I was expecting our first child, and Sarah Katie was born six weeks after moving to Sligo.

In 1988, I got a job as an administrative assistant at CERT, the state agency responsible for providing a trained workforce for the hotel, catering, and tourism industry. I enjoyed working in this position until the early 2000s, mainly because I was involved somewhat in education and training. CERT amalgamated with Bord Fáilte to become Fáilte Ireland in 2003. During this period my second daughter, Laura Joan, was born.

I never lost the desire to become a teacher, and after our third child, Andrew Reid, was born in 1996, I studied Montessori Teaching, did a Special Needs Course and TEFL training. I worked as a Special Needs Assistant, substitute primary school teacher, and teacher of English as a second language. I knew I was finally in my happy place in the classroom.

I worked at Our Lady of Mercy Primary School, a DEIS school in Sligo, in various temporary positions for nearly ten years. I learned a lot from my peers at this school. I would like to especially mention Sister Margaret Roddy, who, in 2009, convinced me to do the Tutor Training Course with the Adult Literacy Service.



I went on to complete a degree in Adult Education part-time while working in the Adult Literacy Service and travelled to Waterford to attend lectures on weekends. I met wonderful people on this course and was so proud when I attained my teaching degree. Granny had a plaque in her house that said, "Don't wait for your boat to come in—row out to meet it." I am very glad I did.

"It is not what we get, but who we become and what we contribute that gives meaning to our lives."

—Anthony Robbins



Rose Jordan



Rose Jordan is a native of Scramogue, County Roscommon, and has been living in Sligo for over 30 years.

She is a founding member of the Sandy Field Writers and has had work published in *The Cormorant*, a broadsheet of fiction and poetry.



Lipstick

She had been up early to bring in turf to light the fire in the range, milk the cows and feed the hens before she roused the children. She urged them to get dressed quickly or they would be late. The shoes she'd polished the night before were lined up at the door, and as they put them on, she dug her chipped fingernail into the bottom of the lipstick holder and scraped out a tiny bit of pigment to smear on her lips before they went to first Mass.

It had come in her trunk from Boston when she came back home to marry. The trunk bore the shipping stickers of her voyage to Cobh, and it contained her finery from her six years in America; taffeta dresses in subtle shades of pink and blue that no longer fitted her swollen waist and were now flittered by moths. Stilettos that were too small now for her bunioned feet, strings of pearls and compacts of fusty gone off face powder. These were now the playthings of her growing family who loved the clipping sound the heels made on the bare cement floor in the kitchen.

Anything else of use had long since been cut up and painstakingly hand-stitched to make outfits for her little girls.

She said she didn't care; she had no place to wear them anyway. Except the lipstick, she kept that tucked safely in the pocket of her sensible Sunday coat.



Christmas in the Seventies

The build-up started for us when Pakie Gibbons put tinsel and selection boxes in the window of the shop we passed every day on the way home from school. We gawked in at the Curly Wurlies, Dairy Milk bars, and Flakes nestling in their plastic beds, in those lovely boxes with Santy and rosy-cheeked little girls on the front. We knew we'd never get one; you might get a bar or two, but a selection box all to yourself would have been a wonder in our house of seven.



Me, Padraic and Catherine

I took a spin to Longford with my older brother Richard after he finished work to see the lights on Christmas Eve. He was getting clothes that would do him for the year: three shirts, two jumpers, a warm winter jacket, and trousers that they took up while we waited with a pint of porter and a mineral in the Market Bar. We passed by Kenny's Ladies Boutique on the way, the window full of mannequins in jeans I longed to have but could never afford. Later that evening, under cover of darkness, my father snuck off into the forestry plantation armed with a hedge knife to illicitly chop down a butt of a tree while we waited at home impatiently with the box of decorations to adorn it. There were chipped and brittle baubles, tinsel, a cornflakes box cut into the shape of a star and covered in tin foil, and the mass of tangled lights kept in a Jacob's biscuit tin. We had a crib too, one of those papery/cardboard pop-up ones that, with age and wear, the heads began to bend over at the neck. Each year another decapitated shepherd appeared in the stable!



The rest of the adornments consisted of holly (good holly with plenty of berries) that Timmy Joe Rhattigan brought each year when he did his holly round on the bike and got a sup of whiskey in return. A sprig of it was placed over pictures of the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin and in each window to the front of the house. The final touches included a length of twine strung across the end of the kitchen to display the Christmas cards (that blew down every time the door was opened!), a couple of swags of colourful paper decorations and a bell that folded up after like accordions for the following year's festivities.

Other things went on behind the scenes. The turkey that was bought in November had been fattened, ready for the kill a week before Christmas Day, allowing hanging time. We were oblivious to this when we were very young, until one Christmas tears were shed when it dawned on us that the golden, breasted bird who lay prostrate on the table was indeed Gobbly, a much-loved pet who had mysteriously disappeared the week before. The pudding and cake were made in advance, and we all took turns mixing in the fruit, whiskey, and fragrant cinnamon, nutmeg and lemon rind, filling the house with Christmas smells.

On Christmas Eve, before we went to bed trembling with excitement, we put out our boxes for Santy and woke very early but didn't dare move for what seemed an age, thinking every sound was him and terrified we'd catch him, and he'd take our presents away. The neighbours used to tease us, saying, "Santy's dead," but we knew it wasn't true because we'd heard him on the radio.

One year, I got a doll for Christmas. She hadn't come from Santy but in a parcel from Daddy's cousin in America. I can still smell her golden-coloured hair. She had real-like eyes that closed when she lay down, perfect lashes, a lovely dress, and little plastic shoes. Her name was Louise, and she was the most beautiful doll I'd ever seen.

Receiving parcels was commonplace. They invariably came from America from family that had 'done well,' and they mostly contained colourful castoff clothing that stood out a mile in dour Ireland. If you appeared at mass in a garish, ill-fitting rigout, you'd be greeted with "I see you got a parcel."

Once, I even managed to make a mini skirt out of the plaid leg of Tom Cahill's trousers, a well-fed, portly cousin whose wife loved to send us parcels. Auntie Jo sent the best ones.



Auntie Jo visiting from America



She had a daughter around my age, and every now and then a box would land plastered in stamps (to us even they were exotic). I got a lovely white leather coat once, with red quilted lining that did my sister after; the fact my cousin's initials were embossed on it didn't really matter. It fit, and we thought that we looked gorgeous.

Christmas morning, we were all up before dawn to see what Santy brought: a doll, a jigsaw, cowboy suits, and guns with caps for the boys, and we'd be straight down to the room to our parents, hopping toys off their heads to wake them up and show off what we got.

We put on our best rigouts and headed to first mass so we could enjoy the breakfast after. In those times you had to fast from the night before so you could receive Communion. Every Sunday, some poor devil with a delicate constitution fainted during the gospel. The choir had been practicing, and we were treated to Silent Night and Away in a Manger, and we all sang our hearts out while at the same time keeping an eye on the Christmas style.

After mass and the chat with the neighbours at the church gate, we collected Katie and headed home for the fry. Katie was Daddy's spinster cousin who wore zip-up bootees and lived in a bothán of a house on her own down in Yard, where the gap under the door was big enough for the cat to come and go as he pleased. No one was left on their own at Christmas, but I think Katie, Ara Muiise God nocany, was glad to get back to her own corner that evening, as a day in our house, especially given that Santy came and the house was full of cowboys, 'would rise the head on a saint.'



*Gerd, Richard, Brendan, me,
Padraic and Catherine with Mammy*





Mammy, me, Maria and Deia

We had the dinner late because the foddering had to be done. We youngsters whiled away the time ambushing each other and watching Billy Smart's Christmas Circus. We were good and hungry by the time the enormous bird (a thirty-two pounder) was carved up with the ham and served with sprouts and stuffing, with pudding and cake for dessert. It was a quiet house for a while as we watched the Morecambe & Wise Christmas Special; the boys gawking at Angela Rippon's legs. After all the excitement and the big feed, we headed to bed early because we had an early start the next morning to get dressed up to go out on the Wran.

The Wran Day was a big occasion and was one of the few opportunities you'd have to get money. We donned Daddy's old topcoat and tied twine round it and either blackened our faces with polish, pulled a sheet over our heads with holes for the eyes and mouth, or else we wore a vizard. The trick was to be disguised enough so as not to be instantly recognisable while not being so well disguised that close neighbours and relatives wouldn't know you and not give you the extra few bob they'd reserved for you.

But there were cheats on both sides. Bridget Murray, who lived at the end of our street, came twice to our house on the same day in different costumes. My poor mother was mortified as she rooted for a few extra coppers to give



her and remarked after,
“I was sure it was Bridget
who landed this morning,”
while some neighbours
refused to let on that they
knew us despite us pulling
up our visards, saying,
“Sure it’s us, Malachy,”
only to be greeted with
“Ara suth, I dunno who
ye are,” and dropping a
measly two-penny piece
into our Bird’s Custard tin
wran box that had a slit
cut out of the lid with the
tin opener.

We walked or biked it from
house to house, but you’d
see the cute wans getting
dropped by car at the end
of the lane so they could
cover more ground.



Daddy

When we traipsed home weary that evening, we emptied out our wran boxes and counted out our earnings, carefully dividing them into ha’pennies, pennies, tuppences, and so on. One year I made seven pounds, ten shillings, and tuppence, and I couldn’t wait to get into Longford to buy my first pair of jeans. The following Saturday, Daddy brought me in, and I went into Kenny’s Boutique and made a beeline for the jeans rail and a pair of flared Ben jeans. “How much are they?” I asked. “Oh, they are seven pounds,” she said, with a look that meant “Get outta here and don’t be annoying me.” But I heeled out my wran box on the floor of Kenny’s Boutique and as the pennies rolled in every direction, I said, “I’ll take them, and you owe me ten shillings and tuppence.”

(*) bothán, a small little house. Originally a bothán scoir was a small very basic one roomed cottage built for poor landless farm labourers by their landlords.

(**) <https://www.sligoheritage.com/archwrenboys.htm>





Marie



Barbara Monks Charleton



Barbara Charleton is an artist who has always had a deep appreciation of the natural world. Her artistic practice has primarily focused on painting. It also includes creative writing, poetry, music, singing, and many other interests.

Her curiosity about the deep mysteries of our existence has led her down many avenues of study because of her wanting to understand and experience living in the world. Human life is a force of wonder, and she regards creativity as an essential part of our nature. Wisdom, she believes, is passed down across time by our ancient ancestors. We have become who we are because of the many stories and rituals passed down through the generations by word of mouth.

She is impressed most of all by children's inquisitiveness and how they seek out answers. She wants to know more of the mysteries that surround us every day in our lives. It is fascinating to know the truth of situations and bringing things to a conclusion.

She has spent many years of her life traveling abroad, and this year she took the courage to fly to New Zealand on her own. Her life was enriched by the many different cultural experiences that helped her to understand the mystery of her own existence.



A Close Call

The Song of Wandering Aengus

*Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk along long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun."*

—William Butler Yeats 1865—1939



Mother and Father

The faith that moves mountains is evident in people who struggle in succeeding in difficult situations to overcome the obstacles of their everyday lives. The day I took my father and mother to Hazelwood will always have a special place in my memory. It was a beautiful summer's day, and we decided to go to Hazelwood. This magical place, with the lake water lapping by the shore and reeds whispering as the soft breeze moved over the water was a delight to walk in the footsteps of Yeats. Many people believe that William Butler Yeats saw Hazelwood as an enchanted place that inspired him in his life. Whenever walking in the forest, Yeats always comes to mind. The first poem I ever learned in school was *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* by William Butler Yeats, which I have never forgotten.

My father and I strolled along the path and shared stories. We watched and listened to the various sounds of birds while observing the beauty around us. In the distance, my mother and my three young daughters were on an adventure of their own. Their laughter got louder the deeper they entered the wood. Father, who was diabetic, stopped suddenly, asking if I had the glucose sweets, which were in the glove compartment of the car. A sense of panic filled me, not knowing which the quickest route was to take. Don't worry, he said, putting his hand in his pocket and taking out his brown rosary beads. His fingers moved with each bead as he walked, praying his rosary. The cascading light that filtered through the trees created a holy space.

It was a close call for my father that day. We arrived back at the car, his beads back in his pocket and a smile on his face. A stillness and the feeling of calm serenity were around us. We watched as the happy children and their grandmother headed towards us, completing their adventure.



A Great Day

Father placed his large black bicycle on the road by the edge of the path, ready to set off. He lifted me up and placed me on the seat attached to the crossbar. My feet were inserted into the metal grips to hold them in place. It was a hot summer's day. My mother dressed me in a pretty pink dress, socks, and sandals. She curled my hair the night before so that long ringlets fell around me, and a ribbon kept the hair from my face.

My father looked tall and handsome, with thick, black, wavy hair. He wore a shirt, tie, and a sleeveless jumper that mother had knit. I noticed his shiny shoes because he had his trousers rolled around his ankles, held with bicycle clips. I was so excited sitting on my own, little feet feeling the gentle breeze and warm sunshine touching my face and bare arms. It felt so wonderful being on an adventure with my father, observing life as we cycled along the road. Now and again his arm stretched out to turn right or left. After he gained speed, he let the bicycle freewheel until he needed to pedal again.

We stopped at a large, white building that turned out to be a school run by nuns. Father parked his bicycle and held my hand as we walked through the gate. We headed towards the three shapes dressed in black. One of them brought us inside and stood beside the principal head nun sitting at a table. We approached the table and stood before them.

They wore a white coif on their heads and a wimple to cover their neck and cheeks. The chest was covered by a guimpe, also white, which seemed to be stiff. It was then I realised the black veil on their heads gave me the impression they were dressed all in black. Father spoke with the principal, speaking of having me enrolled as a student. The seriousness of the conversation filled the air. I could hear the urgency in my father's voice saying, as I was four years old, it was time for me to start attending primary school. Standing listening to the conversation, all I remembered were the words 'there is no room for her as we are full and have no more places.'

Before reaching the gate, I looked back to see the black shapes walking back into the large white building. We set off again and headed on our homeward journey, continuing our big adventure. Seeing my father's feet pedaling, I thought I too could cycle like him. But sadly, my feet got stuck in the spokes, and the bicycle fell, lying on the road. An old lady picked me up and held me in her arms, consoling me. I stared at my daddy, still lying concussed on the road with a continuous flow of traffic passing by.

I have no memory of what happened on our journey home or what my mother said on seeing us. But, as a small child, at some deep level, what happened that day so long ago made an impact on me. Father and I always had a good relationship, and the accident was never spoken about. It was an experience we both shared. Although my father's efforts to have me enrolled in a school did not happen that day, this experience helped to develop a strong bond between us throughout our lives.



Mother

The house is silent. I sit looking at the gallery of photographs displayed on the fridge door. They are held in place by butterflies, crickets, and various other magnets. My eyes roam from the joyful images of the smiling grandchildren and stop at my mother's face. I continue to gaze and become transfixed. Like water pouring from a pitcher, I come to understand how she naturally fell into her groove and followed the path laid out for her. Mother's dreams were simple. They were based on love, marriage, children, and happiness. The unconditional love she manifested has come down through three generations. The mitochondria, which is the energy-creating constituent of a cell, is passed from mother to daughter. This makes my mother much closer to our present-day lives, which is recognisable in my grandchildren.



Baby Rainier

When I was a young child, my special place to sit was beneath the dining room table, where I watched as Mother went about her chores. A memory I have of her is knitting and sewing. I liked the sound of the needles clicking as her fingers worked each row until the jumper grew in size. She never followed a pattern but worked from whatever was in her head. This inspirational and intricate knitting led to many jumpers and cardigans that were knitted for the family. Years later, I recognised the value of what Mother achieved as a young woman with six children.

It was from her I learned to appreciate these creative skills. One evening she decided to make me a dress from plaid material. Being a little older, now I saw how she was totally engrossed with planning the intricate details. She sat at the Singer sewing machine, following her intuition until she completed the decorative stitching on the bodice. It was now late, and I yearned to be under the bedcovers, in the land of nod, fast asleep. But she's eager to complete the dress, so I had to wait until she was satisfied with the result.

The next day, she started two similar dresses for my younger sisters. Many a time I return to that memory and see myself standing in front of my mother, wearing the dress in the almost darkened room, wearing her creation. Mother was quite pleased with herself and stood looking at me with a smile on her face.

Patience, kindness, and gentleness are in most people, but unless we are aware, we do not notice these qualities. These traits, when observed, can be a very good teacher. Long ago, Mother taught me much by her actions of kindness to an old woman who came to the front door. She was dressed all in black with a shawl around her but was not wearing shoes. When the old woman came inside, she sat on a chair. Mother went to find her warm winter boots and placed them on her feet. The image of her standing wrapped in her shawl, crossed at the front and tied at the back, standing facing my mother and both smiling, remains with me. The door was opened, and she headed off, walking into the pale winter sun shining on the morning landscape.

At times, unknown aspects of Mother's life emerge. Each transitory moment I can feel that the beauty and love given by her in her life may fade, but her essence will continue to live on in future generations. They will remain as memories that reflect a mother's enduring love.





Braeden, Medb
and Barbara at
Glowworm Caves
in New Zealand.

Timeless Memory

*".....But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better it lasts for years,
so that you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich."*

—Constantine P. Cavafy 1863—1933

In the great chain of our existence, the desire to feel the freedom of acting and facing the unknown can be liberating. The trip to New Zealand awoke in me a renewed desire for purpose. My daughter Medb and her partner, Paul, invited me to come for a visit. Medb collected me at Auckland Airport on the North Island. When I exited customs, I saw her smiling face in the crowd of people. Hugging, laughing, and talking, we made our way to her car. It was a beautiful day, and Raglan was a two-hour drive. As we put some road behind us, I felt the rhythm of my body linked with the rhythm of the beautiful, calm landscape. Soon I will meet Braeden, my grandson, and Paul, his father. I felt happy to be here sitting beside Medb and a sense of adventure awaiting me.

Raglan is considered a bohemian town. It's famous for surfing, and the people are known to be eco-conscious in their way of life. The inhabitants grow most of their own food, and fish is a big part of their staple diet.



Strolling through the streets of Raglan was such a pleasure, and life was easygoing. Paul drove us north, and we spent three wonderful days sightseeing. We visited Mount Ruapehu, where the film 'Lord of the Rings' was filmed. This mountain rises from the heart of New Zealand and is an active stratovolcano. We swam in Lake Tampa, a volcanic crater lake where pumice stones were abundant. The Huka Falls, where we stood watching the powerful white gushing water tumble down into the turquoise river below, was hypnotic.

The Waitomo Caves, first explored in 1887, were spectacular. Waitomo is made up of two words: 'Wai' (water) and 'Torno' (an entrance). The river lying beneath the cave connects to the upper levels where the glowworms known as the Arachnocampa Luminosa live. Their life cycle is really a marvel of nature. We descended into this cave structure, which was formed around 30 million years ago from bones and shells of marine fossils. When they hardened and the earth shifted, volcanos erupted, and the limestone was carried out to sea. The beauty of the stalactites and stalagmites was breathtaking. The cathedral-like structure is renowned for its acoustics, which, of course, were tried out by the visitors. This world of wonder surrounded by rough stone drew me closer to the sacredness that was present. This experience was unique, and standing in the cavern with my daughter and grandson felt like a rite of passage.

Every day my eyes always looked over to the Mount Kariori mountain not too far from the house. Paul drove us along the winding road to Ruapuke Beach, where we had a picnic and sat watching the setting sun and the sky changing to tangerine. At Manu Bay, we caught the moon as she began to rise and take her place among the stars. Medb, Paul, Braeden and I stood looking as she rose higher into the night sky. The next day Medb suggested we go for our final swim. It was a perfect ending to my visit. The usually lively sea had become a lake. We spent a long time in the water. It felt very special. I felt free, and my awareness of that moment connected me to all the wonderful memories of this time with Medb, Paul, and Braeden in New Zealand, especially Raglan. To create is to bring something into being. These new memories will now be part of my journey and knowledge when going forward living and experiencing life.



Barbara and her mother



Aria Rose



Muireann and Aria Rose



Ben, Eva, Joshua and Oonagh





Harebells at Hazelwood
by Barbara Monks Charleton





Our Lived Memories is a moving collection of stories and poems born from the Memories in a Box project in Sligo Libraries. Five women share vivid recollections of family, traditions, hardships, and triumphs—threads of love and resilience woven through everyday life.

From childhood moments and treasured keepsakes to the echoes of social change in Ireland, these writings capture both personal history and collective heritage. The mix of prose and poetry offers rich textures—by turns tender, lyrical, humorous, and deeply affecting.

Together, these voices create more than memory: they invite us to reflect on our own journeys, reminding us that while every life is unique, the themes of love, loss, joy, and endurance bind us all.

A book of remembrance, heritage, and heart—one that lingers long after the last page is turned.

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