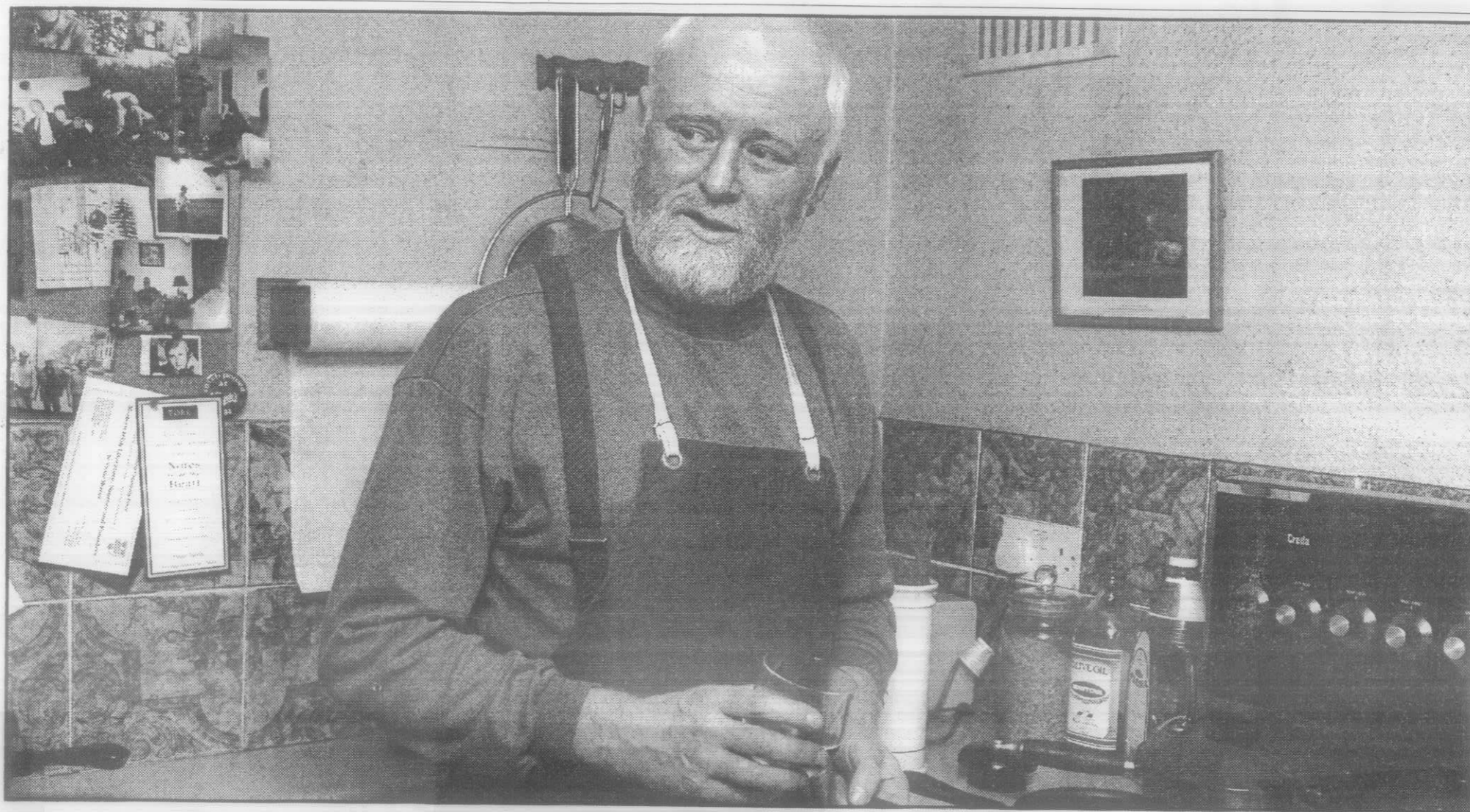


Thursday Interview: broadcaster David Hanly talks to Eileen Battersby



DAVID Hanly appears to be a great believer in the truism that nothing educates as thoroughly — or as painfully — as personal experience. His is one of the most distinctive voices in Irish broadcasting, but he is also one of the less public personalities. Possibly because he sees his entire career as a series of accidents. During ten years presenting RTE's radio news programme *Morning Ireland*, he has become for many listeners the purveyor of the first news of the day, a slightly world-weary messenger.

Despite having conducted news interviews on all subjects, he manages to stand at a remove from journalism. He comes across as a precise and exacting observer, "I hope as the person in the street." He is more a mediator than reporter. His column in the *Sunday Tribune* offers another side to him: "It's just me, reacting to my life. I can write about anything in it, as long as I don't write about politics." Hanly's success lies in his own curiosity, his ability to appear detached as well as responsive. It is obvious that he has not yet lost the capacity for wonder or outrage. Also central to his



David Hanly: 'It is obvious that he has not yet lost the capacity for wonder or outrage.' Photograph: Paddy Whelan

Failte, he also moved his family from their home in Rathfarnham, to the Wicklow mountains. Hanly is reluctant to speak about his novel, saying "that old story of how I became a failed novelist is well known". His novel was published by Morrow in the United States and Hutchinson in London in 1979.

BUT Hanly's real struggles began with his second book: "It almost drove me mad. No, that's not right. It did drive me mad." But what of *In Guilt and In Glory*, a novel written with a passionately-felt, campaigning intent, how does he feel about it now? "What I was trying to do was to fashion a vocabulary that would accommodate the huge changes that had come about in the country, particularly as a result of television." He delivered his second novel to his publishers who were not overly enthusiastic but, anxious to keep Hanly the novelist, were prepared to publish it. "I didn't like it either. I didn't want it published, so I withdrew it." He is matter of fact about it, as he is far more interested in a third book, of which he has written

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style is that whereas many broadcasting journalists give the impression that they are waiting to pounce with a question intended to reduce the interviewee to either apoplectic denials or at least, a nervous collapse, Hanly often conveys a sense of headmasterish disappointment at yet another display of rotten behaviour. Listeners appreciate his occasional flashes of irritation, as he seems to actually care about what is happening in Ireland. He loves Ireland but he is not blind to her faults and believes his sense of outrage to be "a very useful thing". Has he become cynical though, faced as he is with the rapid daily turnover of news? "No, because I think my own sense of incredulity keeps me going."

According to him his approach to news has been influenced by his awareness of a sense of privilege: "I am in the position of asking the questions the public want to ask. I'm not a point scorer." But it is when faced with the stories of more ordinary, individual, human failings, that Hanly is at his most sympathetic, as his television interviews, *Hanly's People*, which became *Writers in Profile*, testify to: "The most exciting humans I have ever encountered," he says, "are writers, especially poets. I think Seamus Heaney has a great mind. He is a major poet, but he has this amazing critical intelligence, as has Derek Mahon."

THE Hanly who may at times appear shocked at the antics of politicians, responds to the vagaries of life as lived by writers with an intuitive understanding. Writing his own novel, *In Guilt and in Glory* (1979) has given him an insight into the way writers work, while his own life has helped him understand their experiences. "I remember when I was preparing to interview Saul Bellow and Mailer — I did them on consecutive days — it struck me that, at that time, these two writers had had 11 wives between them." While researching Bellow's life, he came across an unauthorised biography. "There was a reference to a very painful incident in his life when he discovered that the man he had considered his best friend had been having an affair with his wife, Bellow's third wife, and on top of that, that the man didn't actually like Bellow. I can remember trying to shape a question that wouldn't intrude, about the trauma of discovering that his best friend didn't like him." Hanly says: "I put this to him by beginning along the lines of 'Did you find all your reading, all your knowledge, all your wisdom to be of any use when faced with this painful truth?'" Hanly's carefully phrased and sensitive question culled an immediate reply straight from the master's

gut, if delivered via his awesome intellect. Bellow replied "If you mean was I able to pluck down a volume of Aquinas to ease the pain? No, I wasn't." Hanly liked the morose, interestingly tragic Bellow, a fascinating depressive whose work has always pivoted on the central thesis that the cleverest people do the dumbest things in relationships.

More forgiving of writers than of politicians, he is a good interviewer because he never permits his interest to probe beyond sympathy and good manners. An understated but implicit quality of "we're all together in this mess called life" has enabled him to make the most reticent of writers speak about their lives. Not to suggest that Norman Mailer is reticent about anything, even so — when interviewing him, Hanly knew he would have to discuss the violence which has tended to feature in Mailer's private life. "Mailer stopped dead, saying 'let's finish the interview and at the end we'll come back to it'. At the end, he still couldn't so I just abandoned it."

Since he was a boy growing up in the Limerick of the 1950s, David Hanly admits to being "fascinated by the literature and history of the United States". As he stands, cooking spaghetti bolognese while also overlooking a pot of chicken curry and one of "my 21-day stews" in his kitchen in his Ballsbridge basement flat, Hanly eulogises Bellow, Updike, Cheever, Malamud, Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West.

A generous lender of books, he prefers talking about them than about himself and says: "I have no self image, I don't like looking at myself. I never listen to myself, nor watch myself." After a moment he adds, "I find myself pompous."

In person, Hanly can often have a formal, almost reserved demeanour. Friends say he grows on people. He is a brooder, and tends to look down at the floor, often appearing lost in thought. He is a thinker, a quality which certainly sets him apart from many journalists in a profession in which clipped speech and rapid opinions often seem cultivated attributes, Hanly ponders and muses. He also possesses an almost intimidating sense of fair play.

The longer interview format suits his natural conversational style. "Those 3½-minute radio news interviews are tricky. You only have time to take one angle and then you have to hope for the best. When I was doing those television writer interviews, I had the idea of the programme opening as a typewriter printing up the bare biographi-

cal details of the writer involved, rather than have myself doing the introduction talking to this inanimate object, the camera."

His tumble-dryer is at work in the kitchen. The sun is shining outside in the garden, but he says, "if I went out there, I would have a rash in ten minutes". He admits that he has always been baffled as to what women see in men: "Especially good looking men. I've never liked good looking men, they make life so difficult for the rest of us." Much to his apparent relief, he reached 50 on Monday.

How does he feel about ageing? "It's great. We're all mellowing, at least I am. Being 50 is nice. Suddenly you're free of all those burdensome torments. The ambitions that burnt me up. They can ruin your life and can destroy your family." He has three children, now grown, and was separated nine years ago. "I'm a natural bachelor, a far better uncle than father." Why? "I'm selfish, selfish with my time. I had these ambitions. I wanted to write. I think they should screen men for fatherhood," advises Hanly who first became a father at 21.

His eldest son lives in the flat with him where Hanly maintains an organised domesticity with a ritual meticulousness,

I think they should screen men for fatherhood advises Hanly who first became a father at 21

every plate is washed on arrival in the sink. "I do the shopping on Mondays. I buy all the food for the week." Not only is he an excellent cook, he is an unneringly confident one and admits to being "obsessive" about very hot Indian food, claiming "I could eat chicken curry three times a day and seven days a week."

As a 15-year-old footballer struck down by bursitis of the knee, he asked his father for a subscription to *Time* magazine. "The first issue I received had letters referring to a cover story on a writer named J.D. Salinger. That's how I started off on American literature." Aside from favoured writers, the two men who continually feature in his conversation, are his late father and his brother, the songwriter Mick Hanly, formerly of *Moving Hearts*: "I'm very happy to be now known as Mick Hanly's brother."

Of his father, David Hanly recalls: "He didn't speak to us much. It was that typical

Irish thing, a father and son not really speaking to each other, not really knowing each other. He worked as a commercial traveller with Matterson's. It was a famous old bacon and canning factory in Limerick. They used to send ham to the Tsar of Russia, I remember coming across the invoices one summer when I was a 14-year-old working there." He says he loved his father: "But was I close to him? No. I loved him and I admired him, but I didn't really know him. He didn't have that much to say. People used to remark of his honesty, he was the treasurer of everything he ever joined ... Johnny Hanly was very honest."

Hanly senior compensated for his limited conversations with an ability to break into song on cue — "he sang all the time." Did his presence influence Mick? "Yes, though Mick was always very musical ... from the moment he picked up a guitar another brother had left down." Hanly loves Mick's work and stresses the central role lyrics play in Mick's work, and also the strongly autobiographical content as seen in a song such as *One More From the Daddy*. Of another song, *Medicine Man*, Hanly says: "It's a wonderful allegory about our father, all the more so considering that allegory is so dangerous, so difficult to sustain."

According to his proud brother. "It took Mick Hanly 25 years to become an overnight success. He became famous in 1993 when Hal Ketchum's cover version of *Past the Point of Rescue* became the most played country song in the United States that year and went to number two in the US charts." Its success inspired *I Feel I Should Be Calling You*. But Hanly's father never knew of his songwriter son's achievements. "Both of our parents had died in 1991, within three months of each other."

Was Hanly's a city boyhood? "We lived on the edge of the city, but the countryside, the corncrakes, was just outside."

At the CBS Sexton Street, where most lessons were taught through Irish, he was a good student, a ferocious reader and as he says himself "a jock". Hanly played at centre-forward on the school's Gaelic team and reached a Munster colleges' final, but he says his first love was soccer. There was a

school reunion recently — "14 of us came together after 32 years" and Hanly points out the photographs of his school days which were presented to him and are now hanging on the wall by the fireplace. One of his schoolmates went on to become a crime reporter in New York — "there he is, he arrived in New York to become a professional footballer but he developed a spinal disease. Now he's in a wheelchair which he reports from. He's a real hot shot, does all the big crime stories."

On leaving school, Hanly entered the Civil Service, as an EO in the Department of Industry and Commerce. He didn't go to university — "we didn't have the money. I never regretted it; it's never been a problem. There were no books in my home growing up, I always used the city library." One of his favourite books, is a three-volume set of Rowse's *Annotated Shakespeare*. "I'm sure there are those who would frown upon Rowse, but I love that book." He has a small library of his own and in addition to his avowed appreciation of US fiction, has a special regard for the Cobh-born writer Gerald Hanley (1916-1992) — no relation. Hanly now possesses hardback editions of most of Hanley's work. "I knew him. He was a great friend and a fine writer. He was a great chronicler of East Africa, of the last days of British in Kenya ... See this *The Consul at Sunset* (1951), a beautiful title. It's a marvellous book."

THE Dublin the young David Hanly arrived in was very different to the Limerick Hanly knew as a boy. "I went into digs, but I soon realised that I wanted a place on my own. I fell in love with Baggot Street, Lesson Street, the canal areas." Within nine months he had escaped from the Civil Service and joined RTE in 1964, working as a junior reporter on the *RTE Guide*. Then he began writing *The Kennedys of Castleross*. "That was a great experience for me. I had grown up with it. It was a national institution. I used to run home from school at lunchtime to listen to the show and now I was writing it. When Fry Cadbury withdrew their sponsorship, RTE took it over." He then began writing *The Riordans*.

In 1970, Hanly left RTE to join Bord Failte where he stayed for six years. He enjoyed his time there. It also provided him with much of the background for his novel *In Guilt and in Glory*, which focused on the impact of American cultural imperialism on Ireland. About the time he left Bord

100 pages. I haven't touched it for 10 years, but I can't let it go ... I can't finish it either. But I want to, I want to

leave something worthwhile behind."

After five years in Wicklow, Hanly the aspiring writer, knew he had to return to Dublin, a place he refers to with a measured mock irony as "this siren bitch of a city". He went back to Dublin in search of work. "And all I discovered was that I was unemployable. I was no good. The realisation really hurt." After some freelance sub-editing shifts in the newsrooms around the city, he arrived back at RTE and soon became the night man before moving to day work in the newsroom. He became a cub reporter "at what 37, 38? Yes, I think I was 38. I was an old man. But after a while somebody decided I had a voice and I was asked to do interviews, you know those news reporter interviews, asking questions on the spot."

MEANWHILE, RTE finally launched its breakfast news programme *Morning Ireland*. Why did it take so long? Hanly says it was because marketing experts had decided that the Irish people didn't want such a programme at that hour, preferring light music instead. Its success is by now beyond discussion. Hanly has emerged as its main presenter throughout the last ten years. Rising at 5 am each morning, Hanly says working on the show is great fun — "we've a marvellous team, there's a good spirit on the programme." What of RTE itself? "It seems to me that the idea of Public Service broadcasting and the need to satisfy the demands of the greatest audience are inimical. The worldwide thrust, unfortunately, is towards lowest common denominator broadcasting. I deeply regret this development. Also I suppose I have to admit that it grieves me personally to see so many millions being spent on the Eurovision Song Contest though I accept that it is a genuine cultural phenomenon."

Does he believe in politics? "I've always believed in the American system. In spite of everything, it seems to work, doesn't it?"

Has he heroes? "I do, I did. One by one they fall. I remember Conor Cruise O'Brien was one and Noel Browne. But then I read Browne's autobiography and I realised that this great humanitarian had so little patience with people. He was cruelly exact in his descriptions of individuals. I was disappointed. Lillian Hellmann was a hero, but she turned out to be a liar. Mary McCarthy was right. But a hero who has lasted for me is Mandela. Nelson Mandela is a great man, a true hero."