

# Leader2

Saturday February 25 2012

**Concert series launched** A diverse group of musicians have been picked for the first in a series of concerts >>P4



**She's electric** Our reporter Aine Fitzgerald takes one the newest electric cars for a test drive >>P18

**Spring sneak peek**  
New spring/summer fashions arrive in Limerick >>P22



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## Funding a wild goose chase?

Why is the Government still funding research into allegations made against John and Gertrude Hunt four years after they were dismissed as a 'tissue of lies' by Mary McAleese? **Mike Dwane** investigates

**P**RESIDENT Mary McAleese's emphatic condemnation of allegations that John and Gertrude Hunt - founders of Limerick's cherished Hunt Museum - had links to dealers in art looted by Nazis had been thought to signal the end of a bitter controversy that has dragged on since 2004.

But it has emerged that the Department of the Arts may now be funding two separate investigations into the affair.

On a visit to the museum in January 2008, President McAleese described as "a tissue of lies" the claims made by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (SWC), the international Jewish human rights organisation, as well as figures in the Irish arts establishment.

Aras an Uachtaran's

involvement stemmed from a letter from the SWC's Dr Shimon Samuels in January 2004, calling on the president to suspend an award conferred on the Hunt Museum in order for an investigation into the Hunts and their collection to be carried out.

As well as supposed links with shadowy art dealers, Dr Samuels had cited the Hunts' "close personal ties to Adolf Mahr" - director of the National Museum in the 1930s and leader of the Nazi Party in Ireland - as well as a suggestion that the Hunts' "precipitate flight" from the UK to Ireland in 1940 was an effort by supposed spies to escape the clutches of British intelligence.

An independent report by American art loss expert Dr Lynn Nicholas - published in August 2007 - was the third investigation

embarked upon and, while it recommended further research, found "no evidence" to support the claims against the Hunts. Dr Nicholas accused the SWC of being "unprofessional in the extreme" and seeking to engage the Irish authorities in a game of "blackmail" by declining to show its hand during that investigation.

It was on the strength of the Nicholas Report that President McAleese made her intervention. The Department of the Arts, in a statement to the Limerick Leader in October 2007, also criticised the SWC, saying Dr Nicholas' conclusions the SWC had been undiplomatic and offensive "speaks for itself".

John Hunt Jr, son of John and Gertrude Hunt, did not live to see

his parents exonerated by Dr Nicholas but had recalled his German mother as somebody who was "deeply anti-Fascist". The explanation for their move to Ireland was more mundane than anything that could be found in the pages of Ian Fleming, he said in 2004. As a German living in war-time London, Gertrude Hunt was getting the wrong kind of attention from locals.

But hopes held by the Hunts surviving daughter Trudy that the Nicholas Report had drawn a line under the matter were dashed. The SWC responded with a report of its own - written by Erin Gibbons, an archaeologist who was one of the organisation's sources for the allegations - in 2008, which repeated many of the claims.

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Former Hunt Museum director Virginia Teehan with Trudy Hunt and Mary McAleese at the Limerick museum in January 2008



# Still hunting for Nazis - eight years on

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➔ It was at a 'Holocaust Era Assets' conference in Prague in June 2009 that representatives of the Hunt Museum and the SWC met for the first time. Facilitated by the Department of the Arts, also present in Prague, it was agreed that further research was warranted.

The SWC and the Department agreed upon Yvonne Altman O'Connor as the person who would examine, and in many cases re-examine, various archives and records.

Ms Altman O'Connor is acting curator of the Irish Jewish Museum but carried out the research on an independent basis. It was agreed that she would conduct a "scoping report" to quantify the amount of work to be done and that this would be followed by a full report that would include research of museum and state archives on the continent by a German speaker.

Ms Altman O'Connor's 20-page scoping report was submitted to the Department of the Arts in November 2010 and has been seen by the Limerick Leader.

Speaking this Wednesday, Ms Altman O'Connor didn't dispute an assertion by Trudy Hunt that she had been "nominated by the SWC" but stressed her appointment had been sanctioned by the Department, which also funded the work.

Since submitting the report, the Department had not followed the matter up with her, while Dr Samuels said that "since the Prague conference, the SWC has not been involved in this".

The Department said it has had "intermittent" contact with the SWC since Prague but did not say whether it had furnished a copy of the scoping report to the SWC, as recommended by Ms Altman O'Connor.

"A huge part of all this was to clear the name of John and Gertrude Hunt and of the Hunt Museum and, as you can see from the report, there is very little evidence of anything but it is recommended that there are various other areas where the



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research can be expanded upon, including access to the family papers," Ms Altman O'Connor said.

Given the significance attributed by the Hunts' detractors to a supposed close relationship with Mahr - reiterated in the Gibbons report - it is worth noting that Ms Altman O'Connor's study of letters between John Hunt and Mahr

- in which Hunt attempts to sell an item to the museum director - is not recommended for further research. And she found that a 300-page file on Mahr kept by Irish military intelligence contains "no reference" to the Hunts.

Gerry Mullins' biography of Mahr - Dublin Nazi Number One: The Life of Adolf Mahr - notes that a list of 43 "dependable friends" given by Mahr to his

time at the Flying Boat base (Foynes) during the war and I still believe he probably had ties with Nazi officials," Dr Samuels said.

Despite the above, the transcript of a Morning Ireland interview Dr Samuels gave to Cathal MacCoille on February 10, 2004, shows him stating he could "go as far as saying they (The Hunts) were Nazis".

The reference to Foynes concerns

was recommended by Dr Nicholas and remains a priority both for the Department and the Hunt Museum, one source has dismissed the supposed link.

"Von Frey is known to have dealt in confiscated art but that doesn't mean John Hunt did. Take a car dealer who sells stolen cars as well as cars he buys legitimately. You can buy a car off him that may be legitimate or may be stolen. But even if you do buy a stolen car, that doesn't mean you do so wittingly.

## Hunt daughter wants parents' names cleared

TRUDY Hunt, the daughter of John and Gertrude, this week expressed her "disappointment" with the Hunt Museum and the Department of the Arts for failing to keep her informed of ongoing investigations into the allegations against her parents.

While the museum board has resolved "to maintain frank and open communications with all interested parties", it appears Trudy Hunt - who stepped down from the board along with her late brother John when the allegations surfaced - is not among them.

"I find it quite shocking that the Department would commission another report and that the person to undertake it was nominated by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre," Ms Hunt said.

She had believed that the Lynn Nicholas Report had brought some finality to what she regards as a political campaign against her parents.

"Lynn Nicholas was an independent expert and internationally recognised as such," said Ms Hunt.

She had been happy to allow Dr Nicholas view family papers but won't be facilitating

a recommendation from Ms Altman O'Connor that they be re-examined. "It's not a runner in my view. Lynn Nicholas had full access and I don't see why it should be done again," she said.

That the museum itself continued to investigate the claims against her parents without informing Ms Hunt was "doubly disappointing".

On Dr Samuels' renewed allegations on her parents' politics, Ms Hunt said: "I wouldn't expect him to change his mind. Whenever he has spoken it has always been the same, even eight years on when nothing has been found. I don't think he will ever give up or admit he was wrong."

"It's like there is a political agenda and they are quite happy to scapegoat my father and mother as part of that agenda. But I have no idea what that agenda is."

One consolation was that the latest report had produced no new evidence. "I hope that it will help clear my father's name. His name has to be cleared and preferably in my lifetime. I am the only person left in the family who knew him," said Ms Hunt.

## SWC still believes Hunts had 'Nazi sympathies'

EIGHT years after the controversy first broke and without a single item in the Hunt Collection positively identified as having been looted by Nazis, Dr Shimon Samuels said no apology was warranted for the allegations he made against John and Gertrude Hunt.



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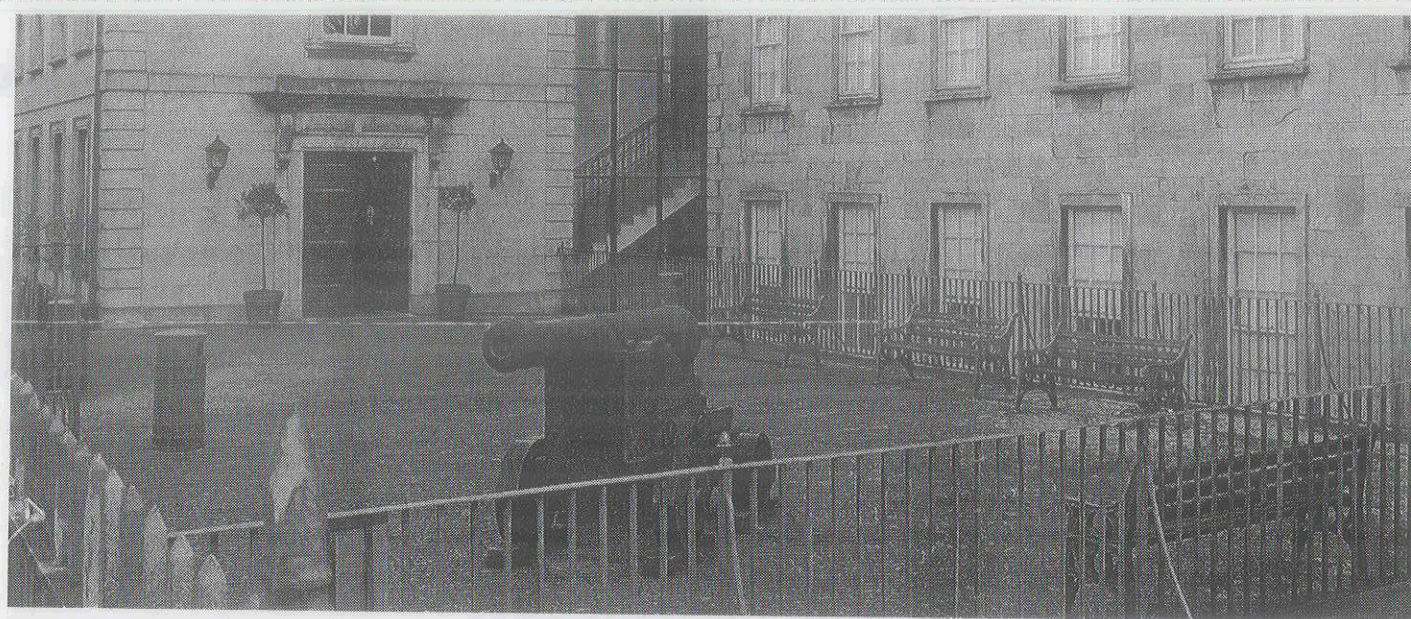
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Gerry Mullins' biography of Mahr - Dublin Nazi Number One: The Life of Adolf Mahr - notes that a list of 43 "dependable friends" given by Mahr to his daughter Ingrid ahead of a 1949 trip to Ireland does not include the Hunts.

But Ms Altman O'Connor said that she couldn't make a solid conclusion that the Hunts' relationship with Mahr was strictly professional, "given there was some connection".

For his part, Dr Samuels is not satisfied that finding no reference to the Hunts in the Mahr file is an end to the matter. While he said of Ms Altman O'Connor that she was somebody for whom he had "only respect", he pointed out that the work done to date was only partially complete.

"A scoping report is precisely that, a scope. It is not exhaustive. If you are scoping into the sea-bed and you are out by a few degrees, you miss everything."

Asked what evidence there was to substantiate SWC allegations that the Hunts relationship with Mahr was as close as suggested, he said he believed the truth would out.

He saw no reason to retract the Mahr claims nor to apologise for having described the Hunts as Nazis on national radio.

"It is not on my conscience, I never called him a Nazi but I believe he may have been a Nazi sympathiser from where he was, when he was, spending a lot of

time at the Flying Boat base (Foynes) during the war and I still believe he probably had ties with Nazi officials," Dr Samuels said.

Despite the above, the transcript of a Morning Ireland interview Dr Samuels gave to Cathal MacCoille on February 10, 2004, shows him stating he could "go as far as saying they (The Hunts) were Nazis".

The reference to Foynes concerns documents in the military intelligence archive and a wartime request from Dr Brendan

O'Regan for the Hunts to decorate the restaurant at the flying boat base. Doubt is expressed over the proposition owing to Gertrude Hunt's nationality and the request is refused - but Dr O'Regan hired the Hunts anyway.

Military intelligence files researched by Ms Altman O'Connor include the Mahr file as well as ledgers and passenger lists in relation to the flying boat base. She recommends that the intelligence files are "considered to be exhausted at this point in time" and "no further scrutiny" necessary - with the exception of a relatively slender file concerning the Hunts that contains intercepted correspondence between the couple and Alexander von Frey - a Swiss dealer who is known to have traded in looted art.

Hunt supporters say the correspondence is mostly personal in nature and includes requests from Gertrude Hunt to send coffee to her mother in Germany. A request from von Frey that the Hunts help him obtain an Irish passport appears to have been ignored.

While tracking down more records in relation to von Frey

was recommended by Dr Nicholas and remains a priority both for the Department and the Hunt Museum, one source has dismissed the supposed link.

"Von Frey is known to have dealt in confiscated art but that doesn't mean John Hunt did. Take a car dealer who sells stolen cars as well as cars he buys legitimately. You can buy a car off him that may be legitimate or may be stolen. But even if you do buy a stolen car, that doesn't mean you do so wittingly. Nothing has been proven with the von Frey thing."

The Department was unable this week to clarify at what stage the follow-up investigation is at but Ms Altman O'Connor, who does not expect to be involved, believes funding to be an issue.

Separately, the board of the Hunt Museum last month approved recommendations from ex-director Virginia Teehan that research into the origins of the collection continue. Current director Hugh Maguire said expects the Department to also fund that research.

There is a further recommendation that a "review" in response to the Gibbons report would be undertaken and published, one of several recommendations the board resolved to see "progressively implemented as resources become available".

What Trudy Hunt fails to understand is how the Department - having in 2007 stood over the conclusions of an internationally-renowned expert like Dr Nicholas - is now funding research into many of the same files.

The Department said that it had to date spent €125,000 on the various investigations but admits "this is not a final and complete figure". Those familiar with the saga predict the final bill will be a multiple of this amount.

## Shocking the department would commission another report

## SWC still believes Hunts had 'Nazi sympathies'

EIGHT years after the controversy first broke and without a single item in the Hunt Collection positively identified as having been looted by Nazis, Dr Shimon Samuels said no apology was warranted for the allegations he made against John and Gertrude Hunt.

"Even though there has not yet been an object which may be claimed, I felt it was an important issue for Ireland," said the man whose letter to President McAleese in January 2004 elevated the controversy from a squabble in the Irish arts world to a diplomatic scandal.

In an interview with the Limerick Leader, Dr Samuels stood over his allegations against the couple.

"I see the Hunts as the classic, quintessential story of people sympathetic to Nazis living in neutral Ireland. Of course Ireland was a neutral country that favoured the British but it was also a neutral country that harboured people sympathetic to the Nazis," he said.

"I believe that transparency and the truth will out and that one day, in time, the true story of the Hunts will be written."

Various people involved in the affair - including former Hunt director Ciaran MacGonigal and archaeologist Erin Gibbons - had indicated they would write that story. But those accounts have not appeared to date.

"I'm sorry she hasn't written the book," Dr Samuels said of the putative Gibbons' work-in-progress.

"No I'm sorry I don't owe anybody an apology. Last week

politics, Ms Hunt said: "I wouldn't expect him to change his mind. Whenever he has spoken it has always been the same, even eight years on when nothing has been found. I don't think he will ever give up or admit he was wrong."

"It's like there is a political agenda and they are quite happy to scapegoat my father and mother as part of that agenda. But I have no idea what that agenda is."

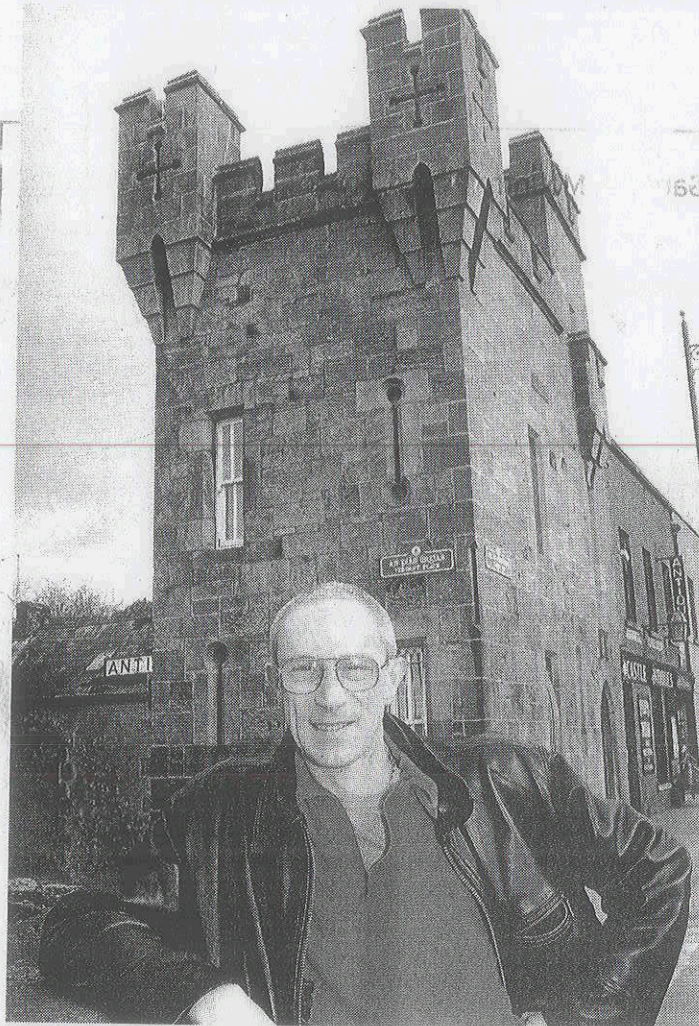
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Not backing down: Dr Shimon Samuels, Simon Wiesenthal Centre

was the 70th anniversary of the Wannsee Conference where 15 Nazi bureaucrats including Heydrich and Eichmann sat around in a mansion near Berlin with food and drink and set about the plan to kill 11 million Jews in Europe, including 330,000 in the UK and 4,000 in Ireland."

"I was born in London after the war and my parents were on that list. It was only circumstances like the opening of the second front and 30 miles of the channel that saved my life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. And the same kind of thing that happened all over Europe would have happened in Ireland and in Britain too, with the swastika flying over Dublin and London. So I am extremely sensitive to the whole issue of collaboration and people later putting a protective ring around what might have happened during the war. The Hunts may have been cogs in all of that," said Dr Samuels.



The late John Hunt recalled his mother being 'deeply anti-fascist'