

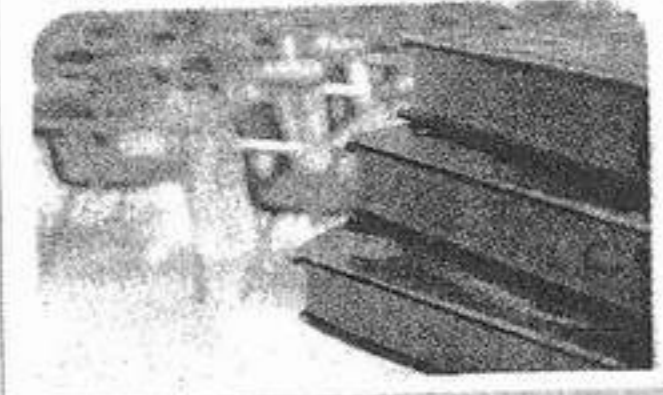
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SATURDAY AUGUST 17 2013

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From Mayfair to Lough Gur

A fascinating account of how art dealer John Hunt swapped London for Limerick is revealed in **Brian O'Connell's** biography

THE late John Hunt's legacy to heritage and the arts in Limerick and Clare is obvious to any visitor to the Hunt Museum which houses almost 2000 artefacts he gifted to the state.

In his new biography of Hunt, former Shannon Heritage chairman Brian O'Connell sets out other significant contributions this Englishman made to projects in the Shannon region, including heritage tourism venues such as Bunratty Castle and Folk Park and Craggaunowen which today attract more than a quarter million overseas visitors to the Mid-West each year.

Jack Hunt and his wife Putzel had become significant players in the pre-war art market in London, Hunt having become a trusted advisor to some of the wealthiest collectors such as Robert Lehman and William Burrell. Queen Mary was a regular visitor to his shop on Bury Street, Mayfair, in the 1930s. Hunt was also trusted as a source of art treasures by some of the world's leading museums including the British Museum,

the Victoria and Albert and The Met in New York.

Jack and Putzel moved to Ireland in 1940 and it was Prof Sean O Riordain's excavations at Lough Gur that brought Hunt - then an enthusiastic amateur

"Because of wartime shortages, the Hunts had to be largely self-sufficient"

Brian O'Connell
John Hunt biographer

archaeologist - to Limerick. They would stay for 14 years, having bought a lakeshore house advertised in the Limerick Leader on December 21, 1940

The Hunts quickly took to life in east Limerick, the Leader also recording their successful participation for many years in the Hospital Annual Show with Jack Hunt taking third place in the "Stone of Shallots" competition in October 1943.

An extract from Mr O'Connell's book shows how easily this refined couple swapped the salons of London for rural Limerick.

In parallel to his archaeological endeavours, Hunt set about extending the house at Lough Gur by converting some of the outbuildings, turning a hayloft into a third upstairs bedroom and creating a garden terrace at the rear. He was a skilled handyman and enjoyed working both on the house and the garden.

Writing to Raftery (Dr Joseph Raftery, assistant archaeologist at the National Museum) on Jack's behalf, Putzel noted that "Jack is plastering and so eager on it that he thinks of nothing else" and, later, that "in his spare time Jack is building a greenhouse but I am afraid it will be too late for tomatoes this year".

They filled the old lime-wash plastered rooms with many of their most precious antiques formerly at Poyle (Poyle Manor, the Hunts' 11-bedroom mansion 17 miles outside central London).



John Hunt was a significant figure in the London art world but was also at home droving cattle to Bruff Mart.

Picture: Hunt Family Album

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How Hunt swapped Mayfair for Lough Gur

Art dealer's love of Limerick and the Mid-West led to extraordinary legacy in heritage and the arts

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These included an Irish dresser, a Sumerian sculpture, a painting by French Realist painter Constantin Guys, a Spanish Gothic tapestry, eighteenth-century faience pottery from Strasbourg and an eighteenth-century Regency bookcase. Their early twelfth-century limewood figure of the Virgin from the lower Rhine, known as the 'Enthroned Madonna', was prominently displayed.

The two early medieval wooden statues by Ligier Richier (a pupil of Michelangelo) stood at either side of an arch in the drawing room and a Picasso painting dedicated to one of the artist's favourite cafés in Barcelona was placed appropriately in the kitchen/dining room.

Many medieval domestic pottery items were used as everyday utensils and, in the decoration and furnishings, the Hunts incorporated as many features of Irish craftsmanship as possible.

The Hunts adapted well to living at Lough Gur as a rural farm couple. Their neighbour, Pat Hickey, recalled how "they integrated very well into the local community and went to mass every Sunday ... They were a very gentle and down-to-earth couple".

Sr Regina O'Brien, one of a family of seven children who lived on a dairy farm next-door, can vividly recall the "warm and sincere" couple ... "happy to mix with ordinary people ... obliging and generous". As the Hunts had no milch cows, their workman would collect milk from the O'Brien farm each day and, on Sundays after mass, the task of supplying the milk to the Hunts was undertaken by the O'Brien children. She recalls Jack and Putzel as being most obliging to their neighbours. As they were the only ones in the area with a



The lakeside property at Lough Gur purchased by the Hunts in 1940 and where they would live for the next 14 years

car, the Hunts would regularly be called upon to bring local people on emergency trips, such as to hospital.

Jack and Putzel always gave the seven O'Brien children presents for Christmas and, in order to assess the most suitable presents for each, the Hunts would come themselves to collect the milk from the O'Brien farm each year in November.

Hunt was also known in the locality as a man with medical knowledge. Sr Regina recalled him bringing his "Red Cross box" to the house to insert stitches in her sister's forehead

on the kitchen table after she had suffered a bad fall, and also being summoned when another infant sibling swallowed a nail. Hunt had seemingly decided that the four years he had spent (training to be a doctor) at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London were going to be put to some beneficial use in rural Ireland!

Because of the shortages of the wartime period, the Hunts had to be largely self-sufficient for their food and fuel. They kept their own herd of dry-stock cattle, looked after by a local "gardener-handyman-of-

all-work", had a small orchard with about two dozen trees, a greenhouse, and grew all their own vegetables and "every kind of herb, thyme, mint, tarragon, chives, parsley, basil, tansy, borage, sage, marjoram, savory". They produced many fruits and vegetables that were not grown by anyone else in the area, including strawberries, artichokes, grapes and tomatoes from their new greenhouse.

Putzel's nationality and her German accent were of some curiosity, both in the farmhouses of Lough Gur and the drawing rooms of Limerick city: "The

locals used to be fascinated with Putzel because she'd be up at half-past six in the morning and she'd have bedclothes hanging out the window being aired - it was a very German thing".

However, their friend, Dr John Devane, who shared Hunt's interest in the local history and archaeology and often hosted Sunday lunches attended by Hunt at his Pery Square, Limerick home, was "outraged by an anti-German attitude towards her in some quarters in Limerick".

The Hunts' world had moved far from the galleries of Mayfair

and the splendour of Poyle Manor. Jack wrote to Tom Kendrick at the British Museum (later the museum's director), on a November day when he had risen early to herd some of his animals on foot for four miles along cold dark roads to a fair:

"My Dear Tom ... I find time somehow amongst other things to raise a few cattle for beef. I was up at 4 (old time) this morning in the moonlight to a cattle fair in Bruff; after standing in the dirty streets slushing about in cow dung and drinking luck pennies in the dark pubs I came back about two this afternoon to



John Hunt: The Man, The Medievalist, The Connoisseur by Brian O'Connell is published by The O'Brien Press

find your letter."

Hunt did not delegate the task of selling his stock to his handyman or a neighbouring farmer and, while we can detect some distaste on his part at the conditions that prevailed at the fair (the filthy conditions at the quarterly street fair in Bruff were notorious) and what

"The Hunts adapted well to living at Lough Gur as a rural farm couple"

Brian O'Connell
John Hunt biographer

he perceived as the quaint customs associated with Irish cattle dealing, he had no qualms about getting his hands, and certainly his boots, dirty as part of his assimilation into his new surroundings.

Extracted with the permission of the publisher The O'Brien Press from *John Hunt* by Brian O'Connell, price €29.99 hardback. Available from all good bookshops and www.obrien.ie.

Picture: Hunt Family Album