

# Heien Buckley's Leisure Page

## In the isolation of Connemara, Dan Doyle finds life absolutely full

HE IS eight miles from even the nearest nurse. The people in Aran enjoy greater proximity to a doctor. The local pub is five miles away and one has to go three miles to the nearest shop. Yet Dan Doyle, in his Connemara Utopia, feels neither physically isolated nor mentally atrophied but peaceful, manually active and intellectually stimulated as ever.

The man who came from Wicklow to found Limerick's first County Library in 1935 was never a socially dependent human being. His 'hobbies'—music, literature, drama, philosophy, partaken in amongst the urban group—were merely "an extension" of his work. His friends sprang from these ventures, not from any domestic or sporting scene. So, in the sense that he was never attuned to the precarious in life and was not influenced by his immediate material surroundings his basic mode of life has been affected little by the Connemara transition. He is perfectly satisfied that life's deadliest viper, ennui, has threatened him, that there was no internal vacuum to afford it entry.

Dan Doyle, who spent thirty-seven years building up a library, the staff of which has increased from one in the mid-thirties to its present dozen or so, and who saw himself not only merely as an accumulator of worthwhile books but as a public official whose duty it was to cultivate in some way the minds of the Limerick populace, arrived in Limerick still under the influence of his teenage mentor Frank O'Connor.

Born on a farm run by his mother, (his father was master of a sailing ship at nineteen—that's why I was a believer in Women's Lib before women's Lib ever came) he attended the Wicklow De La Salle secondary school (where the education "must have been good because now that I'm sixty-five, I'm still curious, still learning, still wanting to learn and still able to let the soup boil over"), and afterwards while drifting about ("eight million unemployed in England at the time—ten million in the States") he came under the aegis of O'Connor.

This break which was to stimulate the semi-latent enthusiasm for the arts in the young Doyle and which was to channel him through his future career came through the help of a former teacher of his.

but the earlier Frank was finding himself. I didn't know him so well in later years. I didn't meet him so often."

From 1924 until he came to Limerick in 1935 Frank worked and learned under Fibbs in Wicklow Co. Library. In March of the latter year he arrived in the city to establish the public service single-handed. At the start he had "no office, no typewriter, no books, not even stationery or envelopes or a desk." Having introduced himself to the Co. secretary—my name's Doyle, I'm the newly appointed Co. librarian—he found himself an office in the first week and started off on the first floor of 105 O'Connell St. Speaking of the difficulties inherent in establishing and furnishing an institution in those days in comparison to the present day he said: "Although in some ways management and science has gone a long way, in a lot of ways everything happens much more slowly today. By the 1st of July, '35, I had taken five thousand books into stock, had catalogued them and classified them and had acquired a library van. I had started to get books out to the people, single handed, within five months of arrival. So much has business gone backward that in that time you could give an order to a book-caller for five thousand books (say you wanted in-

supply. He had, of course, to preface his contributions by explaining that he "was not born in an office desk. I started life in my own home driving cows."

One of the most intriguing aspects of Dan Doyle the man is where he accumulated the knowledge he later imparted ad lib. The explanation of this, perhaps more than any other single factor, sets forth the strength of character and intellectual will-power and the absolute necessity of knowledge as almost a sole *raison d'être* which are the man's main attributes.

Excluding literature in which he had got a basic background in Wicklow and which was available all around him through life, Dan's knowledge of music, art and philosophy came to him through "reading, listening, and keeping up acquaintances with those in the circle."

This, one may say, is not very unusual since many of us acquire a perfunctory knowledge of subjects, without the aid of trained experts, by the same means. But how many of us in similar manner have got to the stage in the subject where we can impart it in depth, coherence and exactitude to others?

Dan: "When I didn't know anything about something I was interested in I spent two or three years reading inces-

saying ten years ago. He said it is impossible to teach, one can only help pupils to learn, and I say Hear Hear to that.

### Chosen

"I was very fortunate that in my last year of service I was chosen by the Government to represent this country in Denmark at a Council of Europe conference on education and public libraries. When I got there I was made the chairman of a study group. The seminar lasted a whole week. In the last decade most countries, upped the years of basic education. The conference concerned itself with those who had left school prior to that and had been deprived, and how to make it up to them. It also dealt with the point that education doesn't stop, even for those who have had considerable education. You have to keep it up. We talked about trying to facilitate people in this sphere to instigate and cultivate their talent and powers and get them to have a new approach to living. All boredom comes from the inside, the only dull place is inside yourself. People go to work every day, come home, have their tea and go out and play cards. They do this fifty weeks of the year, then go on their holidays and stay out



Mr. Doyle: 37 years building up Limerick's County Library Service

Picture: John F. Wright

Dan Doyle "For a whole year the teacher" who was a friend of mine brought me to Frank O'Connor's digs every Sunday night, and every Saturday four of us would cycle around Co. Wicklow. Frank was about twenty-three or twenty-four then and was writing about the period of his second autobiography "My Father's Son". I was a small fellow listening open-mouthed to description of 18th century poets. I was very incoherent then and I don't think I knew myself as a separate human being for a long time afterwards.

But, as Dan said, in answer to my query, "the teacher must have known he was capable of imbibing the atmosphere or 'he wouldn't have brought me to him'. But the boy Dan who "was honestly a small town boy then" was entranced with the intellectual set and its components, introduced to him by Seamus O'Kieley (his ex-teacher) who taught Irish in Wicklow Vocational School side by side with motorcycling to Dublin where he was taking his B.L. (he later became a District Justice in Cork).

Other members of the circle were Padraic Barry, also a teacher, and Geoffrey Fibba, whom Dan afterwards served under in Wicklow Co. Library.

Dan Doyle's "lead in" both to the concrete life of the spirit and to the material sphere of his first job came through O'Connor "One Saturday afternoon as Kieley and myself were cycling to pick up Barry, O'Kieley asked me half way out if I would like to work in the library. Frank had been appointed as Cork Co. Librarian and there was a vacancy in the Wicklow library. So I started to work under Jeffrey Fibba, a writer and intellectual, when Frank left for Cork. He was a most remarkable man.

"There was a story that about two months before I started at the library the London Statesman had a competition for translating a French poem into English verse. Fibba and Frank got back after lunch, took a bottle of champagne into the office and locked the door. They both did the verse translations into English and Jeffrey won the prize."

### Idolised

One of "the earliest memories" Dan Doyle possesses of Frank O'Connor, "when I was under his influence before he left the library," was the appearance of his translations in the Irish Statesman. "I really idolised him at the time. He had an enormous vitality which filled his whole being. It filled the room in, it filled his voice, it filled the radio. Later, when he became a great B.B.C. talker even the mechanics of the radio couldn't convey his tremendous vitality."

But what of the character of the later O'Connor whose image at least was not over-possessive or flatteringly lost touch with him to a great extent after he left Wicklow. The later Frank was possibly a little spoiled and arrogant

could get them involved on the premises within the fortnight. You're lucky now if you can get a copy in a year or two weeks. My first order of two thousand books I had within a fortnight according to the antiquated methods of the 30's. I decided what type of van I wanted and I had it within four months. The last mobile library we ordered took a year to get. The present one has been ordered over six months and they'll be lucky if they have it in another six. I ordered two windows for my house last November and I haven't got them yet."

### Strange

Dan Doyle's initial reaction to Limerick must, he said, have been "something like the impression my father got when he arrived in Klondyke... everything was new and strange. I didn't know anybody of course... but I never had an unhappy moment in Limerick in the thirty-seven years I was there."

His impression of the Limerick he arrived into was that "of the semi-feudal Limerick of Kate O'Brien's novel. It was a personal city in which it was not sufficient for me for my name to be Doyle. They wanted to know what Doyle? People were accepted by name and family. There were groupings of family identity. There was a personal and intimate sense. There were people I knew by sight but whom I didn't know by name. It was a very compact city as long as everybody stayed in their place. The employer knew the employee's family and there was a familiarity which was paternalistic to a great extent. He knew that the employee lived in Ballynans and when his wife was sick, I think this applied anywhere in Ireland at the time." Limerick, however, was "an inward looking city whose cultural zenith was Giblin & Sullivan."

"When I was there a few months I had to ask myself what was my job, what was I to do? The answer was the lives of people which had been circumscribed for want of knowledge. They needed training as they were in many ways not capable of being... this is a recurring decimal. The ideas of literature, art, philosophy, everything in this wide world alternate through a pattern, and that was my job... to get above the material I am aware of this after years of giving poetry lectures, art lectures, art exhibitions, putting on plays, lecturing on rural sociology, lecturing at Muintir na Tire" (he was on the national executive and one-time Co. Secretary). "I was interested in the lives of the people I worked with all day. I don't think public officials can expect people to be interested in them if they are not interested in the people. What kind of friend am I if I'm only interested in what I'm doing and I'm not interested in you?"

### Preface

Macra na Feirste was yet another source into which the optimistic Doyle poured his

anything from art and music to finance and economics. When I felt I knew something I gave a lecture and found I knew nothing. Then I had really to do some work on it. "Myself and Paddy Madden, who is now Co. Librarian in Cork and was then my assistant, decided to do lectures on music and art. We'd come back after tea and work until 3 a.m. Sometimes the members of the poetry circle would call us out at 11 for fish and chips."

Illustrating the sheer slog-work that went into many of these ventures, Dan Doyle told me of the following incident: "We decided we'd bring out a thirty-two page booklet on music and art notes." The authors wanted it on a certain date and were told that to have it then the notes would need to be in the hands of the printers on the following morning. This was quite a demand, since work on the notes had not even started. However, the two men commenced work after tea that evening, stayed up most of the night and had the copy at the printers next morning.

### No hobbies

Perhaps now it is possible to understand what Dan Doyle means when he says that he had no hobbies or social friends in Limerick. "The people I knew in Limerick I knew through my work there. I had no hobbies. I had no time for them." And amazingly: "It is an extraordinary thing your life, your main interests in other people's leisure interest... all work in connection with art and music... an extension of total commitment to education in its broadest spheres."

Now in his sphere in Limerick, which could be termed as that of a semi-recluse, Dan Doyle finds life "still marvellously interesting, still absolutely full... I am interested in things in the living sphere of life. All life is within yourself"... he looks back at his life as a librarian with happiness and equanimity totally devoid of regret: "My job as a bibliographer made me aware of all the books published. Consequently, I had to be aware of anything really new and exciting. It was one of the most exciting positions to be in—always looking for the most learned reviews and searching for anything that was new."

And what did he now think of his contribution to life? "If any progress was made in that period I can only hope I was part of making that progress."

And now that he is not of the pipeline? "My interest has remained in the end rather than in the means."

Dan Doyle may have retired from a categorical position of service to the community but he endorses the statement that his mind is still active by his reply to my question: "If you were starting life over again would you enter a broader sphere of education?"

I read in the paper the other day a statement by a man, Dr. Brendan McGann, which said something I was

lacher would be the relationship of one's friends. (And I can say from experience that after plodding out there, few, even devoted companions, could make the trip with any frequency). This, however, does not worry Dan Doyle in the slightest.

Would it not have been the natural thing then to return to Wicklow on retirement?

"I long ago decided one can't go back on in one's life. You must always go forward." And now that he is exconed in Connemara — "a change for the better, I'm sick of cities" — I was told in response to the question: why choose Connemara?

"Maybe it chose me. I used to say at one time that the only way to go on holiday is to leave oneself behind."

"The only thing that matters it is whatever decent streak in you says you can't do this, you can't leave go and so. He's the one that puts obligations on you that decent man! We thought of going to Aran, but decided it was not a place to live in one's old age because of the isolation. And now we are more isolated than if we were in Aran. You can get a doctor quicker in Aran now with the air service. We decided this was the nearest we could get to Aran without living there."

### Mrs Doyle

In his bungalow/cottage at Camus Lochtar, with its solid turf fire blazing in the hammered copper fireplace designed by himself the like of physical work — particularly the sight of its tangible results, its seven-acre surrounds and its unobstructed sea view from the kitchen and sun lounge, which are under construction, Dan Doyle lives with his Limerick wife (nee O'Dwyer) and their dog Tinker. Mrs. Doyle seems as contented as her husband in the bleak winter countryside, and is as enthusiastic as he is about the many planned trips in his boat in the more element seasons.

All around the people speak Irish, even those who have worked abroad and returned, and will not speak English to anybody capable of conversing in Gaelic unless requested to do so. Despite a somewhat deserted look, the area is quite densely populated — with students as well as "indigenous" many of "the university people and journalists from Dublin" have houses there, according to the Doyles. Eamonn de Buitléar's mother-in-law is a resident. Noel Brown has a cottage in Inverin, and Edmund Delaney, the poet, is also a possessor of a property. Des Fennell has a retreat beyond Carnagh. Radio na Gaeltachta is visible from the Doyles window, and said the redoubtable Doyle, having given me a résumé of the de lights of the area: "When I have no-one to talk to I take up paper and write to some body."

One would imagine that the basic disadvantages of living in a place such as Camus

lacher would be the relationship of one's friends. (And I can say from experience that after plodding out there, few, even devoted companions, could make the trip with any frequency). This, however, does not worry Dan Doyle in the slightest.

### Friends

"It makes no difference, because my friends, regardless of vocation, I often saw only two or three times a year. I had very few friends that I would see even once a week. Even when I was in Limerick our bonds were our interests. I have friends in every county in Ireland and friends in England, Scotland and Europe. I don't feel I have to see them every day, and I think this works vice versa. I know they are there — they know I'm here... when we want to communicate, we communicate."

Since Dan's output from his pen in the sphere of articles for the Standard was considerable at one time ("I was offered a weekly column by the editor and refused. He said, oh, you've decided to be an ama-

mal and only write when you feel like it. I said that's my option. I don't expect particularity in the light of this choice of dwelling place, that he would write a book in retirement. Dan, however, is not compatible with this way of expectation.

"I don't think I will write a book. I probably wouldn't succeed. If I didn't say this I wouldn't be a realist. The book I want to write would mean that I'd have to acquire the ability to catch the tentative thought that passes through your mind at four in the morning and capture it. But for some peculiar reason when you sit down in daylight to write it doesn't seem to be there anymore... The theme of the book...? I don't know — the only question is that I would be able to write down something which I feel intensely so that my reader would feel it. These ideas in my mind never have anything to do with events."

"I use letter writing a lot in this sphere. But by the time I get to the second paragraph the letter has taken hold of me and writes away. I don't know if I could get a better balance between the wilful

and the non-wilful mind. When the mind works too hard to choose words the writing suffers from time to time. I try to do it never use adjectives. The idea should be conveyed in some other way for me. This is probably a reaction to some of the 18th century Irish writers who used a superfluity."

### Journalism

Active "literary" output in the Doyle family was in the hands of his late brother, Jim Doyle, a journalist with the Cork Examiner, one time court stenographer and Irish correspondent of the Chicago Herald. Dan's children have all climbed the steps of academia. His son, now a Franciscan and Dean of Discipline in Gormanston College, studied in U.C.G., Louvain and Rome. One of his daughters, Jane, is at present taking her M.Sc. at U.C.G., another, Claire, works in the office of the Financial Times in Dublin, while a third is married in Co. Kerry and works as a secondary teacher.

When I asked him what his philosophy in life was, Dan Doyle retorted: "I never wrote

an article yet that I didn't enter into philosophy. Now you ask me a straight question and I can't answer it... Then; "The good in life I have always felt is predominant for everybody at one time. It became very clear to me that there are not good people, bad people, generous people, mean people, they are all people, just people. In fact I have found that in everybody you met there was a bit of yourself and it responded to the you that you presented. If I went out to the country and met a man and suggested that he did something useful, he generally did. If somebody suggested to the same man tomorrow not to pay his medical bills he would probably do that also."

And so Dan Doyle, obviously, whatever his philosophy, an individual impervious to outside perfunctory suggestion, is perfectly content to increase his wealth of philosophical thought in his halcyon wilderness, drink in the colours of the sky, read his paper, visit the Carraroe local on Saturday nights and pay his occasional 'rip to a bastion of the outside stress, Galway...

May he enjoy his self-imposed exile.

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