

up. There's bits of Newport and Nenagh in it too, but it's closer to Limerick now," he says of his forthcoming fifth work, due out in the Spring of 2018.

The nuances and complexities of the characters, coupled with the loneliness of rural life, is achingly familiar to anyone who grew up in a small village, outside of city life.

"I'm fascinated and horrified when I meet people who are sometimes completely alone," says Ryan, 40, before he flew out to Paris this week to launch the French language version of *The Thing* about December.

"I wonder how does that work? What are the emotional mechanics of that situation, to be alone every single day? People almost embroider a world around themselves sometimes."

Intrinsic to the imagery in his work are the people he meets, "living off down boreens; a pair of brothers who never married, one dies, one is left on their own, and never a woman involved."

Ryan has, and Gough will too be at pains to point out to the small cohort of 12 in the MA in creative writing that it's cer-



Author Donal Ryan with Vivienne McKechnie, committee member of the upcoming Limerick Literary Festival in honour of Kate O'Brien PICTURE: ADRIAN BUTLER

tainly not a lucrative profession. Nor do award-winners suddenly see a string of extra zeros added to their bank balance overnight.

"God no," says Ryan. "It's hard to make a life-long living from writing."

"People say to me 'Have you got a million euros now?' with really straight faces, and I'm there thinking of my overdraft. I can see how someone would think that, because you see these articles about the best-selling books in Ireland, but you could be number one by selling 500 books."

Gough, who began writing before he was 15, says likewise.

"Writing is a slow-burner. You could be winning awards, and still be not able to pay the rent. You might get a lump sum for winning an award but it goes towards paying the overdraft, or credit card from doing into debt writing the piece. It is a

great life, but you make choices. I love writing and don't want to do anything else, so I do it, and take the consequences, which often are, you'll live in a small flat, and have very little money, but you have your freedom, so it's a trade-off.

"To be a writer you have to have a high tolerance for insecurity and being broke. There's a sliding scale in writing between freedom and security, and money and time. And it can be a bit of a monastic life."

His break from this monk-like existence can be frequently observed on Twitter. His advice to students and aspiring authors before he takes up the post is to exploit these 140-character exchanges, and network to make connections with publishers and agents by striking up conversations of note due to the forum's "flat hierarchy".

"If you're a nice, sane person with some intelligent to say you

can make very good connections before you even start out as a writer. Agents and publishers keep an eye on Twitter for new talents. It is something of an early warning system [of people to watch out for]. These people are just a tweet away, even if writers are living far from the publishing hubs of Dublin and London. JK Rowling may not tweet you back given that she has about nine million followers, but her agent might."

It took him eight years to get his first work published, which may not have been the case now in the era of social-networking, where easy introductions can be made with a bit of good grace.

Ryan too suffered "years in the wilderness" with his own writing, berating himself perhaps to a greater degree than any of his initial 47 rejections, or any critic possibly could.

Nenagh and said 'There's the fellow writing the book.' We had a really repressed culture

Author Julian Gough

"I thought that the 47 rejections was nothing to be honest. You have to ask everybody really, because agents could take a year to get back to you. And you have to send out simultaneous submissions. Are you meant to wait a year between submissions? I say to the students send your novel to everybody, everywhere."

"I used to agonise over every sentence I wrote but I had to stop. I spent 10 years literally doing that, which was ridiculous, which is why I think courses we have in UL are great."

"I don't think there was any MA in creative writing 15 years ago. It definitely would have given me that kick [I needed], having someone to say you have to have this much written in a week. I would have done it. For years, I'd rewrite and rewrite the same sentence over again,

someone laugh or cry through his work. That's the barometer for him, of whether something is good; something powerful enough to hit home.

"I shouldn't have said it to her as she'll be conscious of it, but there's a certain expression I need to see. She read a book, *One Big Damn Puzzler* by John Harding, and we both loved it, and she said 'Oh my god, this is the best book I've ever read', and she had this expression when she read it, and I remember thinking I'd love to write a book that would give her the same expression on her face, so I watch for that now."

"I need to stand at an oblique angle to watch her [expression] and hopefully she forgets I'm watching her. I let on to be doing the washing up, but I'm watching her all time."

Gough advises that everyone is a "terrible writer when they start. The key to being a good writer is to not stop before you come good, and be easy on yourself at the start."

"There is a crisis of masculinity," he explained, "but it's not necessarily a bad thing, if you come out the other end of it, because how do you learn other than through trial, and conflict

larily passionate about, having won a string of prestigious awards for his adult fiction.

"There is not a lot of critical attention paid to them. In a way, it's the most important literature there is, because those are the stories that build the minds of children. I hate some of the processed children's books you get that tie into toys or TV shows - it's like giving them cigarettes for their minds."

Ryan advises that "no matter what you write, there are three main consumptions when it comes to any type of art."

"There are people who will just sneer at everything they hear and see, and they pick some esoteric group of artists or writers to worship, and say if it's not this, it's just sh**. And then there are people who will love what you do, but mostly the market is indifferent."

Even he gets his "fair share" of bad reviews. "One fellow said 'Donal Ryan has had an easy ride through life. I've never met his guy.' I take it really badly, five books in I should be used to it, but I can't. It's my life."

Tickets for A Literary Evening with Gough, Ryan and Durack on January 26 in the Belltable are on sale now, priced at €12/10

New book shines fresh light on fight for independence

TOM TOOMEY

Author and historian

LAST year marked the launch of many fine publications relating to the centenary of the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, generally but the latest publication that is about to come on the market, arguably, leaves all other in the shade. It is entitled 'John Joe's Story' and it deals with the life and experiences of John Joe O'Brien of Galbally and later of Tipperary and Dublin.

John Joe O'Brien was born at Mitchelstown in 1897 the youngest of five children born to William and Bridget O'Brien. When John Joe was still very young the family sold in Mitchelstown and moved to Galbally where they opened a drapery shop and a public house. The village of Galbally and its hinterland had a strong tradition of Fenianism and it was in this environment that John Joe and his older brothers Ned and Willy Pa grew up.

He joined the volunteers in 1914 when he was only seventeen years of age. In June 1918 there were riots in Galbally



IRA member John Joe O'Brien and his wife, Lily

when a number of men from Ballylanders were tried on a charge of riotous behaviour following a political rally in Ballylanders. When the court was convened in Galbally there was a serious danger that the police would lose control of the situation as Galbally men and Ballylanders men, who were

normally sworn opponents, closed ranks in an effort to force the release of the prisoners.

Eventually through the intercession of Liam Manahan and William O'Brien-Moran, solicitor for the defence, calm was brought to the proceedings and the convicted men were taken away to serve short prison

terms in Limerick. John Joe O'Brien and his friends were to the fore, that day, in trying to force the release of the Ballylander's prisoners. The bond formed that day between villagers who were traditionally rivals of long standing, was to have a vital bearing in the struggle that lay ahead.

In May 1919 John Joe was one of five men from Galbally who took part in the rescue of Sean Hogan at Knocklong Railway Station. A number of the Galbally men were wounded and it was the men from Ballylanders who took care of the wounded Galbally men. Following police arrests in September 1919 John Joe and his friend Sean Lynch were forced to go 'on the run'. They were to remain 'on the run' until The Truce in July 1921. Apart from Dan Breen, Sean Hogan and Seamas Robinson they were the longest in that situation and while Breen, Hogan and Robinson were able to secure the relative sanctuary of Michael Collin's Squad in Dublin, O'Brien and Lynch were totally thrust on their own resources to survive until Flying Columns were set

up in the Summer of 1920.

O'Brien participated in the attacks on Ballylanders and Kilmallock RIC Barracks in April and May 1920. Because of a hang over from the Manahan and O'Hannigan split neither O'Brien nor Lynch nor Liam Fraher was involved in the setting up of the East Limerick Column in June 1920. They were instead involved in the setting up of the South Tipperary Flying Column under Dinny Lacey. They fought in numerous actions and barrack attacks with this unit including the Thomastown and Lisnagaul ambushes. The three Galbally men built up a reputation as brave and fearless fighters and as such the East Limerick Brigade requested their transfer back to the East Limerick area in March 1921.

With the East Limerick Column John took part in the actions at Shraherla and Lackelly, in May 1921, in which the IRA lost eight men. He was also involved in a skirmish near Emly shortly after in which a cousin of his, Michael O'Callaghan from Ballyhone, near Emly, was seriously

wounded and captured. On 6 May 1921 he was in action at Newtown near Annacarty when Sean Wall the Brigade O/C was killed. Following the break up of the East Limerick Flying Column he operated with a much smaller active service unit on the slopes of the Galtees in which he had a number of close calls from raiding British military parties, under Captain 'Shakeyhead' Turton.

Following the signing of the Treaty John Joe took the Pro-Treaty side although he found himself on the opposite side to many close friends including his own brother Ned. His book gives an insight to the Civil War in East Limerick that has not previously been aired. John Joe was captured at Caherconlish along with Liam Hayes, Sean Lynch, Joe Graham and a number of other Free State officers. They were taken first to Pallasgrea and then to Tipperary Barracks before they were transferred as Prisoners of War to Cork City. They were released in August 1922 by the intercession of Dan Breen with whom John Joe had a life long friendship.

Following the ending of the Civil War in April 1923 John Joe returned to Galbally to try and pick up the pieces. Their business premises and dwelling house had been wrecked by the Green Howard in a scandalous act of wanton vandalism before the British Regiment departed. Ironically if the premises had been burned to the ground the family would have been able to claim compensation but apparently wanton acts of vandalism that did not entail burning were not to be compensated.

John Joe's Story, which was written by his son Stan O'Brien, and was based on John Joe's Witness Statement and countless extensive interviews that Stan carried out, gives us a fascinating insight into the most momentous period in our history.

The book which runs to 380 pages is a must for all serious students of the period especially those from North Cork, East Limerick and South Tipperary.

The book which retails at €20 will be launched in Galbally Community Hall on Saturday, January 21 at 8pm.

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