

MAUREEN MCKEEVER

Kevin McManus



It is a rare treasure to meet a person who can engage you in a conversation about their thoughts and memories and clearly evoke a lucid and absorbing picture of a highly accomplished life. One such person is Maureen McKeever now living in Mullingar. However she spent her young and formative years in Derrycarne House in Annaduff.

Derrycarne House was originally built in the seventeenth century by the

Nesbitt family and they resided there for approximately two hundred years until it was purchased by William Richard Ormsby Gore (Baron Harlech) in 1858. In 1924 the house was bought by a Colonel Kirkwood, however the Kirkwood family did not stay long in Derrycarne and in 1937 it was again on the market, and at this time Maureen's father James A Kiernan, solicitor and county registrar for Leitrim purchased the historic estate. Maureen paints a

grand and beautiful picture of the house and gardens in those days, with large stables situated close by, men hunting in the surrounding countryside and local people fishing and boating in the Shannon which flowed adjacent to Derrycarne. Many prominent individuals came to stay with the Kiernans. The high court judges always stayed when they came on circuit. Most notably the Finlay family spent time there, Tom Finlay went on to become the



The photograph taken outside Derry Carne House, names as follows left to right. My Mother Helen Kiernan Richard Hayward, who went to the River Shannon & down to the sea, and a lot of Co Leitrim comes into books. Hansen Kiernan James A. Kiernan Solicitor Ballinamore. James Kiernan Thomas A. Finlay who was the third best Chief Justice of Ireland, Richard Haywards photograph who was killed in 1914 in London in Dec 2 my cousin Thomas Devine and William D. Finlay became Governor of the Bank of Ireland.

risters on circuit would stay in the Bush Hotel, which was a famous landmark in the town. Grand dinners were held there for members of the legal profession called bar dinners.

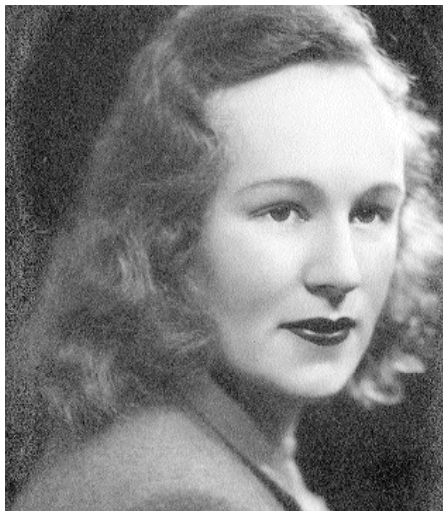
Every Thursday Maureen travelled into Carrick where she met up with her close friend Dean Beresford, who she describes as a "character and marvellous storyteller". The Dean's house, the rectory, was situated beside where the new roundabout is in Carrick today. The Dean would escort Maureen up to the Rectory, where his wife provided her with lunch. Maureen travelled to and from Carrick to Derrycarne with a pony and trap. The pony was affectionately called Paddy Kiernan and the shrewd old pony knew the trip home well as it brought Maureen home often late at night by moonlight through Jamestown and Drum-sna and to Derrycarne. If the weather was not suitable for that mode of transport she would take a lift on "the Carrigallen bus" which was owned and driven by Ned

Maguire. The bus would arrive in Carrick at four o'clock on a Thursday sounding its horn as it approached town. The interior of the vehicle was full of anxious shoppers and occasionally a number of calves could be seen peering out the windows of the bus as it travelled through town. On top of the bus Maureen would place her large sack of sheep's heads, which she purchased from a butcher in Carrick to feed her dogs at Derrycarne. The trip on the bus might often be a long and arduous affair with passengers, calves, luggage and groceries frequently having to be removed off the bus as it attempted to chug up steep hills with the passengers giving a helping hand by pushing the bus. When the bus reached the top of the hill the contents would have to be reloaded again.

Maureen's blissful life in Leitrim

Chief Justice and Bill Finlay became the governor of the Bank of Ireland.

Maureen has vivid memories of trips to Carrick On Shannon during her youth particularly to the annual show held there. Her father was President of the show committee and she believes it was a marvellous event surpassed only by the R.D.S. show in splendour. The town was also a busy stop off point for barristers on their way to Sligo from Dublin. Bar-



sadly came to an end after her father died in 1944. "Derrycarne was a dreadful tragedy in the end". After James A Kiernan's death, Derrycarne house was again put on the market. Maureen and her family temporarily rented a house in Boyle. The person who eventually bought Derrycarne was an English woman called Lady Dorothy Mack, the wife of an English army commander called Dick Mack, the property had been recommended to them by Lord Granard of Castleforbes. The new owners of Derrycarne never established the same good relationship with the local people as the Kiernan's did during their time there. Lady Dorothy in fact became extremely unpopular because she banned people from hunting on her lands and boating and fishing on the part of the Shannon which flowed through the estate. The fact that Lady Dorothy was the wife of a British army commander didn't help matters and as Maureen said "Leitrim at that time was a hot bed of I.R.A. activity, especially around Dromod". The conflict between Lady Dorothy and the locals came to a head when one-night shots were fired at Derrycarne house. This was enough to convince the owner to move out and put the historic house up for sale. She could not secure

what she considered to be a suitable price and in anger had the centuries old house demolished rather than sell it at a loss. "It was a disgrace what happened". Where the fine house once stood is now overgrown with trees planted by the land commission which block the once spectacular view towards the Shannon. Maureen, a number of years ago, visited the site and after fifty years could still make out where the beautiful rose gardens planted by her mother decades before had bloomed, the remains of the water garden were faintly visible and she could also make out the outline of the majestic house where countless generations of families including her own had lived.

After Derrycarne, Maureen's life moved on, she married Desmond McKeever. Desmond was a member of the Irish Guards and was a part of a tank regiment that fought in World War Two. He was unfortunate to be caught in an explosion and as a result sustained heavy injuries to his face and shoulders. Desmond lost his hearing, nonetheless he persevered by learning to lip read.

In the nineteen fifties Maureen took up residence and a position in Westmeath working alongside her sister, Maeve rearing and nursing horses at the Cleaboy stud farm. Maeve reared world-renowned champion horses such as Brown Sabre, Valetta, Fox-trot and Silver Fox. The owner of Cleaboy stud was a millionaire Englishman by the name of Major Holiday. The two sisters reared foals up to yearlings under the guidance of the accomplished trainer Major Hearn. He had an expert eye for horses and picked up horses for training and selling at the Newmarket sales in England every October. Everyone was keen to buy horses

from the Cleaboy stable known at markets as "the Holiday lot"

Maureen's specific job at Cleaboy was as a night nurse and she believes that many people do not realise the stress and hard work that goes on in a stud farm. She was helped out at her task as nurse to the horses by a vet called Mick Murphy who she describes "a wizard with sick horses". The stud was surrounded with fabulous grazing land for horses, full of limestone. Foulis arrived from England with little thin legs and returned as powerful horses after their stay at Cleaboy stud.

Of all the horses Maureen nurtured the one that stands out was a foal from Winston Churchill's famous sire called Vienna and from Major Holiday's foundation mare called Noble Lassie. That particular foal named Vaguely Noble went on to win a number of prestigious races in Ireland and England and arguably the greatest horse race in the world in Paris in 1968, the Prix de l'arc de Triomphe. Another famous horse reared by Maureen and her sister-Maeve was *Ida* that won the Whitechurch maiden stakes in the Phoenix Park beating the favourite called Hotpot ridden by the legendary Lester Piggott.

Alongside rearing horses, Maureen's other great passion was breeding champion red setters. She always kept a red setter with her in every occupation she took up in Ireland or England. She would never take up a position unless she was allowed to bring her red setter with her. Maureen has bred hundreds of red setters over the years since she began with her first one in 1939 called

Uisce Batha whom she received from Martin Colohan from Ballinasloe. This began a tradition of naming the dogs after alcoholic drinks. Maureen's dogs ended up in the homes of some very important people including the White House in the United States during President Nixon's term in office. In December 1966 Maureen hit the headlines in the national press when King Baudouin of Belgium chartered his own private jet to Ireland and sent Mr. Francis Leo Goffart the Belgian ambassador to Ireland to Maureen's Westmeath home to purchase one of her internationally renowned red setters. The dog called Derrycarne King was placed in a royal dog box and flown back to the king's palace in Belgium.

Maureen's love for horses and dogs has brought her into contact with many celebrated individuals such as the famous actress Rosaleen Lenehan. Maureen has developed a close friendship with Rosaleen since the time her father, the Fine Gael councillor for east Donegal, Dan MacMenamin began visiting Cleaboy stud in the 1950's. Maureen's career has also brought her to the verge of performing as an actress herself. The author Richard Hayward who stayed at Derrycarne during his travels was a close friend of Maurice Walsh.

Maurice wrote the book *Castle Gillian* that was adapted and made into the classic film, *The Quiet Man* starring John Wayne & Maureen O'Hara. Due to the phenomenal success of *The Quiet Man*, another of Maurice Walsh's books called *The Road To Nowhere* was adapted as a film screen play and during its pre-production stages Maureen was offered a lead role in the film. Unfortunately



the screenplay never actually made it to the silver screen due to the outbreak of World War II.

Throughout Maureen's later life she has taken up a number of occupations such as a hostess at dinner parties for the former Australian ambassador to Ireland, Lloyd Thompson at the Australian embassy in Killiney in Dublin. Notables such

as former President Hillary, Charlie Haughey and the British and German ambassadors frequently attended these dinner parties.

Maureen keeps up a bright outlook on life and now in her mid eighties possesses a sharp mind with a vivid and highly articulate recall of events she has experienced throughout her extraordinary and full life.