

Turlough McConnell with Ireland's Middleweight boxer John Duddy (left) and actor Seamus McDonagh, the former New York Golden Gloves Heavyweight Champion, at the opening of Fighting Irishmen exhibition. (0608DS2)

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When our Turlough went from here to there

By Sue Doherty

Sometimes when you get chatting to a person who has emigrated from Ireland, you can catch a glimpse of our country's own evolution over the last thirty or so years. That's very much the case with Buncrana man Turlough McConnell, whose writing and music took him first to Dublin and then on to New York.

Turlough grew up on Main Street, Buncrana where his parents owned The Souvenir House on Market Square and his grandparents owned The Atlantic Hotel. It was, he recalls, a marvellous time.

"I grew up in the Fifties, early Sixties. It was a wonderful time to be in Buncrana. There was great prosperity after World War II; we always had busloads of tourists coming in.

"Then the Troubles came and everything stopped. I went to Dublin to join the Abbey Theatre School as a writer but I got side-lined into the folk scene, which was just taking off. I met an American composer named David Mead. We collaborated on songs and recorded for Polydor. He was a very dedicated, serious composer. We created a show based on the Irish classic novel *The Crock of Gold* that was staged at The Gaiety in 1974. Then I moved to New York, where I worked away writing and producing for the theatre and television. I soon lined up a day job as well, as a writer/producer of corporate films and videos. It was the early days of videos back then.

My true interest was in not losing touch with Ireland, Donegal and Buncrana. I did a lot of work for Bord Failte, and *Córas Tráchtála*, the forerunner of the IDA. Through that, I soon found myself involved in organising trade shows and exhibitions, alongside my media work for major American companies.

"Then in the early 1990s, when Irish American media started to take off, I began working with Niall O'Dowd. This was during the Clinton years, soon after when Niall and Editor Patricia Harty founded *Irish America Magazine*. I joined that team; it was so exciting and lots of fun. And the wonder is that we continue to work passionately on projects today especially with the advent, earlier this year, of *IrishCentral.com*. The main thing is we see real change taking place every day despite these volcanic economic times.

"One of the highlights of my career was being at the Guildhall with the Clintons. It was possibly the most exciting public day of my life, because you experienced history in the making. You saw how it happened and how it could continue to happen. And you realised that there are

no excuses for not fully engaging with that."

The Fighting Irish

Turlough was back in town for the launch by Barry McGuigan of the Fighting Irish exhibition at the Ulster American Folk Park. The exhibition originated at the famed Irish Arts Center under the leadership of New York real estate mogul and sports enthusiast Jim Houlihan. Turlough immediately saw the potential of the show and he was very much involved in taking it to Manhattan's South Street Seaport Museum and then for several months to Boston College. Along the way he thought it would be ideal to take to Ireland. When he met Pat O'Donnell from the Ulster American Folk Park at a symposium last year, a great idea was born.

"The Fighting Irish follows Irish American history through boxing. We've seen so many boxing movies but probably not realised the huge Irish input into the sport," he says. A quick glance through the roster of famous Irish American boxers brings the point home: Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, 'Gentleman' Jim Corbett, and Jim 'Cinderella Man' Braddock, to name a few.

Even now, the Irish are making their mark. Maureen 'Moe' Shea is known as 'The Real Million Dollar Baby'. The record-breaking superfeatherweight trained Hilary Swank and sparred with her for the film. The pair trained together at Gleason's Gym, New York City's boxing Mecca.

Turlough is delighted at how popular the exhibition is proving. "There are so many wonderful artefacts in this exhibition, for example Liam Neeson's boxing gloves. Liam always says that had it not been for the boxing club, he definitely would have taken his energies in a different direction, given the situation in the North when he was growing up.

"This exhibition is bringing in people who are not the usual museum goers. There are trips from gyms, with loads of young people travelling up for the day."

"Pat O'Donnell did an amazing job staging this exhibition. She is a phenomenal curator. On the day it opened, we had a party out on Quay Street. Out walked two guys, two bare-knuckle fighters. Because it's such an authentic setting, you catch yourself thinking, 'My God, this really is The Gangs of New York'.

In what may seem an odd comparison, Turlough says boxing is a lot like poetry. "Boxing has this whole other dimension - the history of the individual. You have a team of people around you but when you go into the ring, you're on your own. Very solitary people go into boxing.

"I think there are a lot of similarities between boxing and poetry. Just look at

Gene Tunney. He was very literary, very well read, a writer and best friends with George Bernard Shaw, who incidentally was really into boxing and fancied himself as a boxer."

Other projects

During his brief visit, Turlough popped up to Belfast to check up on a project he hopes to develop with another lad from Budgen, Pat Doherty (Big Hill), chairman of the Titanic Quarter. In conjunction with the South Street Seaport Museum in New York and the National Museums of Northern Ireland, Turlough is working on the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the sinking Titanic in 2012. "This as a great opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the Port of Belfast and the Northern Ireland shipbuilding industry. There's a huge demand in New York for something big to mark the 100th. New York City Council's Speaker is Christine Quinn. Her grandmother was one of the survivors. There's a real interest in how we develop this exhibition authentically."

Turlough is currently working with Tourism Ireland on a special marketing feature on Ulster that will launch later this year in Atlanta, Georgia. He's tremendously proud of the "sea change of peace that has swept through Northern Ireland in the last twenty years. To my way of thinking, the North has a huge responsibility to show other people how it's done."

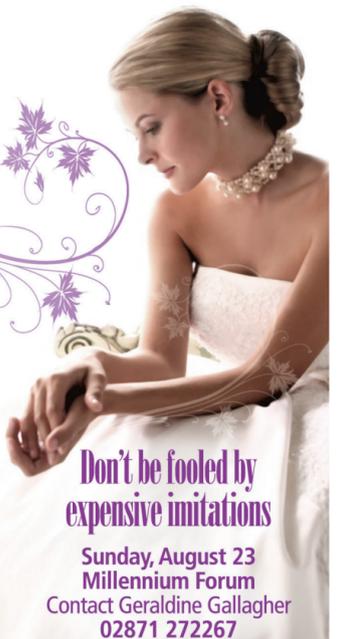
It's that kind of thinking that was motivated Turlough and Niall to set up the US-Ireland Forum three years ago. "It's a chance to go on record about the changing conversation between Ireland and the US. The first was in Manhattan in 2007, the second in UCD last year and this year's will be in London in November. We've always had our culture and strong connections, our ability to meet with people and connect with people.

"Now, with travel and the internet, a lot of the barriers caused by location are coming down. That's why we are excited about *IrishCentral.com*, a portal for all things Irish. The one thing we all know is we are communicating more and we are saying important things. The diaspora is not about leaving or going away. It's not a one way street; it's a constant flow back and forth."

Derry Journal

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