

Migrants lost in shock of the New

Search for a family who fled to Boston mixes bravery, compelling analysis and painful details, says **David Monagan**

A Century of Silence: Echoes from a Massachusetts Landscape

Norman Mongan

Herodotus Press, €16.99

AT once emblematic and ultimately shocking, *A Century of Silence: Echoes from a Massachusetts Landscape* is the poignant story of the vanishing of an Irish family abroad decades after the Famine. Such severance affected nearly every household on this island and encounters with fresh travails on “the other side” were scarcely rare. In fact, a great many immigrants suffered from such heartbreak and failure, alcoholism and family schisms that they stopped all communication home. In author Norman Mongan’s case, an entire family line disappeared.

Feeling a deepening void after his parents died, the

Mullingar native — a former advertising exec in Paris and an only child — became obsessed with an epic ghost-hunting quest, in the opposite direction of the typical Irish roots story. What, he wanted to know, had happened to all his great-uncles and aunts (and their offspring) after fleeing to Boston at the end of the 19th Century? Mongan had no letters, addresses, or pictures of any living American relatives to connect with. His memoir concerns his passionate 20-year dig through distant clues and revelations.

A relentless researcher, Mongan soon discovered that it was the daughters of Erin who often led each family’s exodus: 60 per cent of the late 19th-Century emigrants to Massachusetts were women. A great number became live-in maids, which meant they were nuns in new stripes, too shut-in to court, marry or reproduce. The Colleens withered on the vine, as did two of the author’s grand-aunts. Or



LAND OF THE FREE, BUT NOT EASY: The Statue of Liberty’s welcome often presaged years of struggle for immigrants

they worked in shoe factories, like his aunts Catherine and Maria-Theresa, and took to fanatical Catholicism.

But the centre of *A Century of Silence* concerns the more shocking tale of the author’s grand-uncle Michael Mongan’s spiralling out of control in the promised land. A former Mullingar railway worker, he contracted syphilis in Dublin’s Monto then, in shame and

hope, fled for America where he married another Irish immigrant. What fascinated Mongan was that the man’s name was never mentioned in Mullingar again for the next hundred years. Why?

Mongan, author of *The History of the Guitar in Jazz* and *The Menapia Quest*, dug through distant archives, government records and old newspaper accounts fraught

with dead ends before ultimately discovering that his family’s Odysseus cracked under the strain of emigration and ultimately hanged himself in a lunatic asylum in Worcester, Massachusetts. That dire institution had become a kind of collection point for no-hope Irish emigrants. Though a stolid worker on Boston’s initially horse-drawn mass transportation system, and clever, the man developed a serious drink problem, aggravated by the death of his first child from cholera.

Michael Mongan next fell off the side of a transport carriage, suffering sufficient brain trauma to induce seizures and bring out the haunted face of the struggling emigrant in south Boston. When bingeing, he grew abusive and deluded, occasionally threatened his growing family with a gun and put his dead daughter’s coffin plate over the family’s meagre flat’s door. So began a pattern of confinements and escapes from the loony bin.

Bravery and compelling sociological analysis, with aching personal details, come with this part of Mongan’s

telling — which reads like a window into a side of Irish emigration that has been rarely exorcised with such immediacy. Letting a skeleton out of a closet produces shock waves.

Ultimately, *A Century of Silence* takes uplifting turns as Mongan rejoices in meeting living relatives who welcome him into their lives — his spiritual journey paid off. The book is not seamless, as some sections suffer from excess detail and structural imperfections, but this book is a rare fish and an eye-opener. Along the way, one meets a curious cast, including the ghost of a clairvoyant aunt with a direct line to the Virgin Mary. The streets of the new world were paved with longing, not gold.

“Bring us your poor, your tired, your huddled masses longing to be free” indeed.

David Monagan is an Irish-American writer, resident in Cork for 10 years, and author of Jaywalking with the Irish (Lonely Planet, 2004), Ireland Unhinged (forthcoming), and other works. Somewhere back in time, he may be related to Mongan