

Why Did I Stay?

"Django Reinhardt, Gevrey-Chambertin, la cuisine et la Femme Francaise" says Norman Mongan, Dublin-born son of a Westmeath family. Like that other Parisien-Irishman, James Joyce, he was educated at Belvedere College, Dublin, and having studied at the College of Art there, came to Paris for a few months in the early '60s and has been putting off leaving ever since.

In the Gallic capital he used his talents as jazz guitarist initially, playing at the leading clubs, notably with Joseph Reinhardt, Django's younger brother. Mongan recalls that the music was greatly inspired by the decor, "It was a total culture-clash, and just sitting on a terrace of a café girl-watching was an uplifting experience. It still is". He drifted into the Paris advertising scene, and as Art Director worked with leading French and American agencies,

and now runs his own independent Creative Consultancy, conceiving campaigns and films, many of which have won awards at the French Art Directors Club. He has also found time to write a book, *The History of the Guitar in Jazz* that is due to be published later this year, and is at present working on a second that delves into the Gaulish roots of an Irish clan. "Being an exile makes you more aware of your heritage, and just how deep our roots go in Ireland". He did live in New York in the late '60s but

the pull of the French way of life was too strong. "Frankly, apart from Rome I can't think of another city I'd want to live in besides Paris".

He nevertheless does get back to Ireland several times a year and heads down to Ballinskelligs, Co. Kerry where he has a cottage with some friends. Mongan sees himself as a Hiberno-European, though, "The French see the Irish as the Latins of the North. I think we're inclined to forget that France had, and still has, many Celtic roots in common with Ireland"



Photograph by Jim McDonnell

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NEWS
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Paris-based writer's book examines his Mullingar heritage

A Paris-based author has put together a book which tells the sad story of his grandfather's family - six sisters and one brother of whom emigrated from Mullingar to Boston in the 1880s.

Norman Mongan, who grew up in Dublin, but who has lived in Paris for the past forty years, is author of "A Century of Silence", which is to have its midland launch on Tuesday evening next at Belvedere House at 6 p.m. on Tuesday evening next.

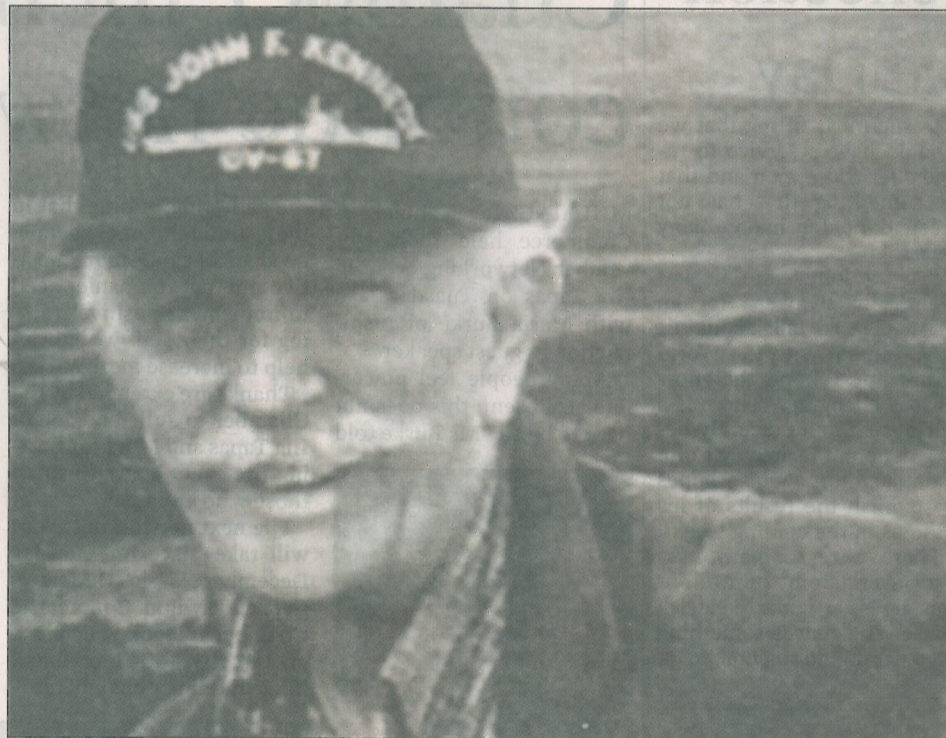
The book chronicles the odyssey of Norman's ill-fated paternal grand-uncle and his six sisters, who emigrated to Boston, and who ultimately all lost contact with home.

Tragically, Norman's grand-uncle became mentally ill in the US, and wound up in an institution, where, eventually, he took his own life.

On a happier note however, Norman has succeeded in tracking down descendants of some of his grandaunts in the US - and discovered that one of those descendants, Dr. Eoin Kiernan, now aged 95, rose in his career to the extent of becoming the Massachusetts State Governor for Education.

Norman always knew there was a story in his family's background, but it wasn't until he began to carry out the twenty years of research that went into "A Century of Silence" that he found out exactly what that story was.

"My great-great-grand-aunt, Mary Mongan, (c 1840-1918)



who joined the staff of Belvedere House, Mullingar, c1856, was appointed Housekeeper, and married Coachman John Duignam with whom she had four children," says Norman. "Her daughter Mary Josephine, took over as housekeeper on her mother's passing, and held the position until her retirement c1939, when she went to operate a boarding house at 40 Mount St until she died in 1957.

"Mary (Mongan) Duignam's nephew, Michael, my granduncle worked with the MGWR Chief Freight Clerk, at Mullingar, until he joined the British Army at Well-

ington Barracks in 1884.

"He, along with his six intrepid sisters, emigrated to Boston in 1888, to face his tragic destiny in America."

Along with them went Norman's own grandfather - but he, happily, did return to Ireland, and moved to take up a job in Longford.

Norman heard growing up about his grandfather's siblings who went to the US - and knew that "something" had happened to his granduncle, Michael.

That "something" turned out to be the mental illness that the family here never referred to, because of the

shame, and stigma, that was associated with mental illness in those times.

In the course of his researches into the story of the family members who emigrated, an emotional experience for Norman came when, after fourteen years' of waiting, he was finally granted access to the medical records concerning his granduncle. "And it contained his actual words, what he said to the doctors," says Norman, who admits that having completed the book he feels "total relief", as at times, it was an emotional experience, and he even found himself going

through stages of writer's block.

Of the six sisters who emigrated to Boston with Michael, three got married. "I have found two families descended write down to the present day, and they came to Ireland last year," says Norman, explaining that among these new-found relatives is the former Massachusetts State Governor for Education.

"They had just a vague knowledge" of their Irishness, says Norman of his distant US cousins.

"But there was a veil pulled down over the sad story of Michael."

Norman was well qualified to take on the task of researching and writing the book, as his background is in media and publicity. He worked initially in advertising in Paris, and then moved into the tourism business, bringing French groups to Ireland.

He is also a writer and filmmaker, and his most recent documentary was shown at the Irish Film Institute and the Dutch embassy in Dublin three years ago.

He is currently working on another film project which keeps him moving between Dublin and Paris.

All are welcome along to the launch of "A Century of Silence" at Belvedere House this coming Tuesday from 6-8 p.m., where they will also be able to meet the author himself.