

## Prof Joe Lee of New York University at the Book Launch of Norman Mongan's new book 'A Century of Silence' (condensed version)

I am so enthused, partly by the subject of this book because we have been working in recent years at that enterprise in New York, on the Diaspora, ... And its when Norman very kindly and very generously, and very risk-takingly, asked me and invited me to introduce this, I thought, yes, with great interest, this is an Irish-American connection book.

This is an extraordinary volume, in terms of family history, because, lets put it like this, there's no piety in it, it's a reverential book. If I can put it like that, there's reverence for the family, there's reverence for the human beings involved, but it is not a work of piety, in the sense of looking at only the good things in family life. On the contrary, the very title, 'A Century of Silence', My quest to find my ill-fated granduncle in America' is a very rare orientation, in terms of the type of literature that emerges, by and large, from reminiscences, explorations on Irish-American, Irish Diasporic experience, identity, etc.,

It's a work of unflinching intellectual integrity, in terms of tracing the fortunes and the misfortunes of the members of the family, and when one is talking about unflinching intellectual integrity, one is actually speaking about a very rare quality in most writing..... It boils down to a topic that is very rarely written about, very rarely approached as candidly, as sensitively, as probingly as this one, and that is that the granduncle, Michael Mongan, committed suicide in Worcester Insane Asylum in 1903.....Its an extra ordinary research endeavour! Thoroughly extraordinary!

And he's made himself into a total professional. I'll put it like that, and professional plus, because there are qualities of inquisitiveness, qualities of intuition, there are qualities of 'how do I try and trace somebody who has vanished' ..... Here's a comment by Marian Casey, a terrific historian, *What I consider to be the most fertile ground for research on the Irish in America, is the intersection of genealogy and history'* And that in effect is what this book is about. It is genealogy as history! It's not just an intersection. It genealogy as history!

So what historians have been talking about for ages, and haven't done, and Norman has pioneered in so many ways, how that might be done, we can talk about linking up the Irish on both sides. We shouldn't just forget it, or they forget us, ...they come back looking for their roots....Norman, in a sense, has gone in the other direction, looking at what happened the family over a hundred years, and has had to reconstruct their histories.

Now, as I say, he has done it with immense sensitivity, immense persistence. He has turned up an extraordinary number of details, .... of data, which I would regard as impossible to ever recover.... Norman is a professional beyond the level of professionalism, which I, and many of my colleagues, who write on Irish Diaspora, have actually achieved in this context.

Now when you add to that, he writes with a command of language, with a felicity in the use of language, that is very rare, among people writing about the past, or the present, for that matter, let me say it's actually a joy to read this. It's a real pleasure to know that you are in the hands of somebody who uses language, as language ought to be used, when you think of the sheer joy of language, of what language means to civilisation, and how often it is assaulted, rather than mobilised by those who use it. Then to be able to read a book like this, which keeps you just wafting along on the sheer command of language, is a joy in its own right....

This is about family, and what he brings out time and time again, just by reconstructing the record, with enormous, enormous research commitment, is just how much brothers and sisters, in a sense, depended on one another.... This is, without ever stressing it, or making any ideological or other point about it, is showing how normal human beings, behave under pressure at various times, positively and negatively, in the book as a whole, so its an extremely rounded picture of the human condition as reflected through Norman's family, the wider family.....

So this to me, Norman, is genuine true history in a way that I have not seen it done either in this country or abroad, previously....As I read it through I said this is phenomenal! And he is so modest, and there is no hint of it being phenomenal in the book!. But I'm bloody well saying it's phenomenal. Alright, Norman! This is a wonderful achievement!! My warmest congratulations. (Applause)

## FAMILY HISTORY

**A Century of Silence : echoes from a Massachusetts landscape.** Norman Mongan. *Herodotus Press, PO Box 4674, Dublin 8. 275 pp €16.99 pb 23 cm +0-9525414-1-7.* Mongan has written books before, one on the history of the jazz guitar and one on Celtic Ireland. His full-time occupation is as film maker and photographer. He has lived in Paris since 1962. This present book is a look back into his family's past. The discovery of an old photograph of a woman who turned out to be an American aunt set him off on a quest to discover more about that side of his family. The result is a history of the Irish who left to find work in the United States in the 1880s as revealed in this family. Although Mongan set out to discover his grand-uncle in America, much of the book is taken up with his aunts who arrived in Boston looking for work as domestic servants or factory workers. Their story is one of success for immigrants in Massachusetts but the story of the uncle, Michael, is more enigmatic and ultimately sad, for he fell on hard times and suffered mental illness. Norman Mongan meticulously reconstructs the story using his medical files which took him fourteen years to track down. A well written family history that reveals two sides to the Irish experience in nineteenth-century America. We guess Herodotus Press is the author himself. Printing – with photos well reproduced among the text – is an example of how 'digital' book production can be as good as offset lithography. | ♣♣ ❄ ↗ \* ✓

# 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

It 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 severe affliction 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

newspaper accounts fraught with this part of Mongan's

with dead ends before ultimately discovering that his family's Odyseus 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 exercised 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*