

Interview

Due North speaks to Doreen Corcoran MBE

Doreen Corcocan was a founder member of the Federation for Ulster Local Studies. Her knowledge of local history and societies within the Federation is unsurpassed. She is an invaluable member. The Federation was delighted to learn that she has recently been awarded a well deserved M.B.E.

D.N. To begin with can you tell us a little about your background?

D.C. : I was brought up between Belfast and Carrickfergus in Greenisland. I was greatly influenced by my immediate family, my grandparents who lived in Carrickfergus, my Glens of Antrim Granny and count myself blessed to have been part of a great community, surrounded by a large close family and the sense of history connected with the neighbourhood.

D.N. Would you say your upbringing influenced your later career?

D.C. : Yes definitely. I was brought up near the historic town of Carrickfergus as part of a close knit family with wonderful neighbours. This influenced me in believing good communications are vital. Communication leads to understanding and prevents disagreements. The first thing my mother did when she got up in the morning was open the door so that neighbours could walk in and out at will. If people really understand each others viewpoint they are more likely to be tolerant. As a community we had great feeling and understanding of one another because of the links and I learned to love gossip. That is the reason I originally offered to write 'Link' which I envisaged as a gossipy paper linking societies and telling them about developments in the Federation and so on. I hoped to be able to provide some-



thing of the spirit in which I grew up to societies within the Federation.

D.N. As a result of your experience do you see yourself as part of a tradition related to Ireland as a whole or to Ulster ?

D.C. : Definitely Ireland as a whole. Of course when I was growing up I knew the border existed but I never took any particular notice of it. I think of myself as belonging to Ireland not just Ulster. That is one of the reasons I have been keen to develop links between local history societies in the north and south.

D.N. Do you think the past, either personal or general, has influenced you?

D. C. : Oh yes! I feel I was very lucky to grow up in Carrickfergus with its castle, the old church of St Nicholas and all the history associated with the area. I was also fortunate to have a mixed marriage in my family so grew up with experience of both sides of the religious divide. I felt I understood and had sympathy with both sides and the experience led to an interest in politics.

D. N. You have travelled widely. Do you find people around the world have a particular image of Ulster in terms of its history and culture?

D.C. Prior to the troubles most people had no idea of where Ireland was, never mind Ulster! If I met anyone with any perception of Ireland it was annoying and very inaccurate. Ireland was seen as a poverty stricken land with thatched cottages, 'pigs in the parlour' and people who drank too much!

After the troubles Ireland became widely known through its spectacular violent headlines. The headlines were greatly exaggerated so people's perceptions were equally annoying, but in a different way.

D.N. Do you have a particular part of Ireland that holds a special memory, or somewhere where you feel most at home?

D.C. : Oh yes! The Glens of Antrim and being with my Granny, who impressed me because of her Glens dialect, fairy stories and being dressed in a long black skirt, shawl, mob cap and button boots!. I love the ambience of the glens, their beauty and their people. It is a place where I always feel completely at home, a deep feeling of this is where I belong. I think Prof Estyn Evans was right when he said that within us we carry deep seated folk memories. My folk memories feel at home in the Glens of Antrim.

D.N. What do you fear most about Ireland's future?

D.C. Oh dear! I feel it's happened already. Prosperity and travelling have changed the Irish world in which I grew up. The days when people kept their doors open so the neighbours could walk in and out are gone. We can eat all types of food from China, Italy, Japan, India and from lots of other countries. Our old style of building has gone, we now have skyscrapers. Our individuality is in the process of disappearing. Remnants are left but I fear Ireland will turn out to be just the same as everywhere else. I think it's very important to preserve our heritage and to retain our distinctive character. I think it is almost a moral duty to pass on the past. I

have made sure my grandchildren know about their ancestry and about their local history.

D.N. Is there any part of the world you found particularly interesting and why?

D.C. Oh yes! Prague and the Faroe Islands.. I don't know why, but I always wanted to go to Prague then when it gained freedom from the Communists I was very lucky. I spotted an advert in a local paper about the availability of a flat to rent in Prague. I replied and suddenly it was all arranged! I could go and spend time there, well away from tourists in a young couple's apartment in a tower block of flats. It was fascinating. Of course in a way I was just another tourist but I feel I got more under the surface of Prague than I would have on a package holiday. I was able to go down and buy breakfast in the local corner supermarket and became very aware of the shortages experienced by locals. The supermarket was not like our supermarkets. You had to buy what was available on that particular day, or go without. It was interesting. And I loved the buildings, the old streets, the squares. Pure magic!

And I loved the Faroe Islands and the whole Nordic experience. At home I'm used to feeling I know about my surroundings and the Faros were so different I didn't know anything and was intrigued. I didn't realize there were so many, 17, I think, mountain tops sticking out of the ocean between Scotland and Iceland. They were so beautiful they took my breath away.

D.N. Conversely, is there any place you disliked, and why?

D. C. : Washington! It was beautiful but completely without soul. The down town buildings are modern versions of ones found in ancient Rome. I found it cold and impersonal. I did not like it.

D.N. Did anyone have a strong influence of you and how were you influenced?

D.C. : I spent a lot of time with my Carrickfergus Grandparents. The order of their house always impressed me. It was fantastic. Granny had a place for everything and everything in its place. In comparison home seemed chaotic. We were a large family and home was always full

of bodies with the neighbours coming and going.

Granny had a cake tin and there was always a home-baked cake inside. Granny would take the tin out of its place in the cupboard and give me a slice. I loved it. Their house was so quiet. I began reading books there. At a very early age I convinced them I was trustworthy so they allowed me into the parlour with its large bookcase full of books. I read avidly, all sorts of things and many were, I'm sure, completely unsuitable for children, but there were also Sunday School Prizes, good books by R.M. Ballantine and so on. I was enthralled by *Black Beauty* and cried bitter tears when he saw his dear friend, Ginger, lying dead in a cart on the way to the knackers' yard. My Mother first took me to the 'pictures' in Carrick. I was only allowed to see the likes of Shirley Temple and Carmen Miranda, with her wonderful hats. I loved the way they danced and wanted to be able to dance like that. I quickly broadened and developed my own taste and fancied myself as Maureen O'Hara

D.N. If you had the possibility of travelling through time and could meet someone. Is there anyone you would particularly like to meet?

D.C. : Gore Vidal, Vince Cable and Maureen O'Hara. I love Gore Vidal's skeptical writing and his articulate performances when he is interviewed on T.V.

Vince Cable strikes me as being an interesting, fair-minded, balanced politician. He was the only person who could talk sensibly about the recent money crisis.

Maureen O'Hara, as a child I longed to look like her with that glorious shock of red hair. I loved the movies in which she appeared and the way she was feisty. I've read a lot about her. She married an American aviator and had a summer home in Glengarriff, where I once hung around the gates hoping she would appear. R.T.E. showed her Irish 50th birthday party and she looked as lovely as ever.

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