

Writer Eileen Heneghan speaks to Aileen Slattery, who is now based in Sydney, Australia

Episode Description: *In this engaging episode, Aileen reflects on her journey from childhood in Clonmel to a successful legal career in Sydney. Guided by Eileen's thoughtful and empathetic interviewing, she speaks candidly about family, loss, achievement and belonging.*

Aileen's performances of Carrickfergus and The Parting Glass add warmth and emotion while a contribution from her centenarian neighbour provides an unexpected highlight.

The Clonmel Exchanges Podcast Project is a partnership project with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

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Hello and welcome to *Loving and Leaving Clonmel*. In this series, we share the stories of Clonmel natives who have moved away and are now living all over the world. We'll hear about their roots, what they miss most, and what life is like for them now.

In this episode, writer Eileen Heneghan speaks with Aileen Slattery, who is now based in Sydney, Australia.

Eileen: The River Suir runs through Clonmel and sits at the heart of this story. A river that carries childhood memory, loss, and still somehow remains a place Aileen loves.

Aileen: I grew up in 39 O'Connell Street, right in the centre. I walked to school every day over the Gashouse Bridge. There were a few times when the place flooded, which was great because I didn't have to go to school!

So I started at Loreto when I was three and a half, and then went the whole way through with Loreto.

Eileen: Were they happy days, school days?

Aileen: Yeah, they were all right. I don't honestly—I don't have a lot of recollections. I have great fondness for the nuns who were there, because in those days we had a lot of them. We had a few lay teachers, but we had an awful lot of nuns at that stage.

Particularly when I was young, we were all little. They were very kind.

Eileen: What would a typical day have been like in Clonmel for you growing up at home?

Aileen: Yeah, well, after school, I'd come home and I'd usually work in the shop until the shop closed. We had a TV shop, so that was Joe Slattery.

And then, depending on my age at the time, I suppose I'd go out doing one of my Red Cross activities, or I'd be going to the choir or something like that.

When I was younger, there weren't many kids my age around in the street. So there wasn't an awful lot of socialising, because you couldn't just pop next door to see your friend, because there weren't any.

So I didn't do a lot. I used to work in the shop on a Saturday. On the Sunday, as I got older, I also had little dogs, so I'd take my dog for a walk down by the river, which was always nice.

As I got older and I had a car, I'd take off and go on a Sunday drive. And, you know, as I got older and had other friends outside of school, a couple of us would take off in the car and just go and do nice Sunday drives.

And when it was the odd day that the weather was good, we might go down to Clonea or Dungarven or something like that.

Eileen: And then, in terms of interests, as you grew into your teens—well, from when you were small and then into your teens—what did you like doing or love doing?

Aileen: I was always into music. I was in the Peter and Paul's choir for many years with Mrs Russell at the helm. And then, as I got older, I joined the Red Cross. I started that when I was about 16, and basically I kept going with that until I left Ireland.

Eileen: Another wonderful act of service. It sounds like community is very important to you.

Aileen: Yeah. And I was really active in it, but it was also fun. I mean, it was all, you know, people your own age group doing things which were positive. And yes, I suppose helping others, but we had an awful lot of fun as well.

So I wouldn't like to come across as too charitable! There was lots of fun attached to it as well, and it kept you busy.

Eileen: How about your family? The family that you grew up in. Did your parents come from Clonmel?

Aileen: So my dad came from Clonmel. He and his family lived in Glenconnor. He was one of nine. And my mum originally came from Sligo, and they met in London.

Then they ultimately moved over to Canada for a few years, and then they came to Clonmel and stayed there.

Eileen: So that was a long journey, really, to come back home.

Aileen: Yes. Yes.

Eileen: What were your parents' names, Aileen?

Aileen: Joe and Sheila Slattery.

Eileen: And were there many children in the family?

Aileen: They originally had their first son, who was Sean, who was born in Canada, and he came back with them when he was about three, three and a half.

Unfortunately, he drowned in the river behind our house when he was four and a half.

Eileen: That must have been an enormous—well, not must have been, that was an enormous tragedy.

Aileen: Oh, it was huge. It was huge. And I think it affected the community. I know it affected a lot of our neighbours.

I remember being quite young and lots of neighbours coming in all the time and talking about Sean, and yes, it was awful. The fact that it happened in the river behind the house added to the tragedy of it all. And they got through it as best they could, but of course it's not something that they would have ever recovered from.

Eileen: Very, very sad. And my sympathies to you, because that never leaves, that sort of grief. You live with it, but you don't ever forget.

Aileen: Oh God, no. No. I think it followed them both through the rest of their lives.

Eileen: And this happened before you were born, Aileen?

Aileen: Yeah, that was in September '63. Mum was pregnant with my brother Paul. She was eight months pregnant at the time with my brother Paul when it happened.

One of Aileen's neighbours and childhood influences is Mary Carey. Now almost 103 years old, Mary recalls Aileen as a child.

Eileen: Mary, what was Aileen like as a little girl?

Mary: She was lovely. She played in and out our house, and she was the only child in our end of the street.

Narrator: Mary recalls the tragic passing of Sean.

Mary: The neighbours were very, very good to his mother and father. It was the first child that died in O'Connell Street. When his father came home and told that Sean had died, everybody broke down, and they had one of the biggest funerals.

Perhaps it was the weaving of all of this—the place, the loss, and that quiet strength—that made it possible at 21 to leave and begin a life on the other side of the world.

But why Australia?

Aileen: I had an aunt in Melbourne called Aileen. Obviously, I was named after her, whom I'd never met. So I wanted to visit her.

All my friends were leaving and they were going to England primarily, and the States, and I basically didn't want to be the last one left. So I took off and just kind of went further than everybody else.

So my plan was to go out and do the 12-month working holiday visa and then come back home. But I never quite committed to staying here, but I never quite got home.

I was very lucky when I got here. The place I ended up working in in Sydney sponsored me for residency, and that made it very easy.

I met a lot of great people here very quickly once I was in Sydney, and they became very firm friends, and they are still my friends today. And I think it was as a result of meeting them that I really kind of wanted to stay.

Eileen: Wow. It feels like you, on a level, came home to yourself in another way when you arrived in Sydney.

Aileen: Yeah. I was incredibly lucky. I mean, I'd been in Melbourne first, and I didn't find that particularly friendly, but it depends on, you know, who you meet.

And obviously, when you're here by yourself, your main source of social life is through work. And I found in Melbourne they were very—they were friendly enough at work, but they would

never, even though they knew I was living with an elderly aunt and uncle and knew nobody else in the world, it didn't really occur to them to invite me out with them to social things.

Whilst I got to Sydney and I was out—I think in the first couple of days after I started this firm, I was out socialising with them all the time.

Even though Sydney would end up being welcoming, it wasn't easy making such a huge adjustment to a life so far away.

Aileen: I was terrified. I cried all the way from Clonmel—or from, where did I go? Shannon. From Shannon to Singapore.

By the time I got to Australia, I was absolutely shattered. [Laughs] And I was nervous as—but you just—yeah, I got through it.

But it wasn't—I didn't feel particularly brave. There was many times I'd go, "What the hell have I done?" Particularly because I was so alone.

And then, when I came to Sydney, I was completely alone. I do remember walking down the street one day going, "You know, I could die in my room in this hotel and nobody would know."

And so, yeah, I did have the odd dark thought.

Eileen: Well done.

Aileen: Yeah. So it was—it wasn't easy. It certainly wasn't easy. And I was at stages just wanting to just get on a plane and get home again.

And you just had to go through these things. And, you know, things do work out. You've just got to hang in there until things get better, and things got better.

[Music]

Eileen: Did you work as a legal secretary in Sydney?

Aileen: I did. So I did temp work as a legal secretary when I first came to Sydney, and that's where I met all these friends and they sponsored me.

And I ended up staying at this firm. And then, a couple of years down the track, I started studying part-time for a law degree, and ultimately I became a lawyer.

So I basically do all the divorce work, acting for parties in relation to property settlements and parenting issues, and these days lots of prenuptial agreements and all that lovely stuff.

So I get screamed at lots by my clients!

Eileen: It's remarkable, again, bringing all your gifts and, I think, strength, and how amazing your determination, you know, to really work your way to where you are now.

And do you work in a company, or do you have your own company?

Aileen: I've got my own firm. I'm in partnership with three others, and there's about 20 of us all up now.

So yeah, that's been going for a long time. Long time. So it's pretty—we're based in the centre of Sydney.

It's hard work, but, you know, that's life.

Eileen: And did you continue your love of music as you moved through your life?

Aileen: Once I moved to Sydney, I did join a choir, which was the St Andrew's Cathedral Choir, which was based in the city, and I really liked that.

But at that stage I got incredibly busy with work and I just couldn't commit. And that was a choir that you had to commit to quite fully. So at that stage I basically had to relinquish that.

And I've only just started back now in the last three years. I've joined a community choir, and I'm really totally enjoying that. And it's not a pressure.

We did sing at the Opera House in November, which was incredibly exciting. And yes, we worked very, very hard for that, but normally it's not a big pressure.

You come when you can. If you're not able to go, it doesn't matter. So I'm quite enjoying that. That's a lot of fun.

I've made some new friends again, which is fun, because when you get into your 60s, you don't make as many friends. You think you've probably got your community around you, but it's actually lovely to meet new people again.

So yeah, it's been fun.

Eileen: Fantastic. That must have been an incredible experience to sing in the Sydney Opera House. Such an incredible, beautiful building.

Aileen: It was amazing. And there was 600 of us, and it was amazing. It really was. It was a real pinch-me moment to be standing there.

Yeah, it was just amazing. And we did it well. We didn't stuff it up!

Eileen: When you come back, how is it coming back? The early years first, while your parents were alive, and then—

Aileen: Yeah. The best—well, my dad died before I came to Australia, which made it much harder for me to actually go.

But Mum was very supportive of me going and was great in that respect.

So my early years of coming back are, you know, the memory is Mum at the airport and probably being there for hours beforehand, and the excitement of seeing my mum and how she looked after me and all that kind of lovely, lovely stuff.

And I missed that incredibly, obviously, after she died.

I was there—well, when she got sick, I came home and I was with her for the three months before she died and looked after her at home with the help of the amazing hospice nurses in Clonmel.

God, they were amazing.

But yeah, ever since then, it's not the same when your mum's not there. I mean, my brother's there, and it's lovely to see my brother, but he can come over here. It's that thing of, you know, when you're going home and you don't have a home anymore. And I found I went home for a friend's wedding and I stayed at the Clonmel Arms. I thought, "This is really weird. This is my hometown and I'm staying in a hotel."

It was quite nice. I like the Clonmel Arms. But it was still—it was a very odd feeling.

Eileen: Yes, I can understand that. And that sense of being home in your town and just around the corner from your original home, and the changes that take place.

Aileen: Yes. I must say, I was quite shocked when I went home in September in terms of the town itself of Clonmel.

My God, I was so shocked. It was so sad. And I brought three friends with me from Australia, because I really wanted them to see—well, they really wanted to see where I'd grown up.

So I was, you know, taking them down the town and all the shops are all boarded up, and it was quiet, and it's just so not what the town was like when I was growing up, which was—it was so buzzy. It was such a great atmosphere at night.

It was beautiful, and all the lights everywhere. And yeah, so it was quite a shock to see it this time, and really sad. Really sad.

Eileen: I can understand that. I think, actually, not just—I think there's a lot of—we're in a very big transition in Ireland, probably all over the world, where, you know—

I think there are great efforts being made to counteract that within Clonmel. And even this Junction Festival brings great life and many people to visit, and the arts explored. And I think during difficult times, the arts support us as well.

Aileen: Well, I think that's just so important. So important.

And there's some lovely parts in the town. I mean, when I was growing up, I remember it was the old Main Guard, with John Cooney's pub down there and everything. And what a beautiful job they did of that. It was just gorgeous. Absolutely.

I really miss the Clonmel Arms, because I spent half my life there. But there's still some very beautiful parts.

[Music]

I still went down the quay, walked down there, because that was a walk I'd done all my life living in Ireland.

So there were some lovely places. Obviously, St Patrick's Well is one of the closest places in my heart, and it was lovely to take my friends out there and they could see how beautiful it was as well.

Going down to Marlfield, Sandybanks is a hell of a lot more sophisticated than it was when I was a kid. It was lovely looking, going to those places.

Sad to see the Friary gone, and closed, and, you know, it's changed. But I'm hoping—and I have been checking up on the Facebook pages about Clonmel and everything—and I'm seeing that

there's movement there to get it going again, and I really, really hope that that works because it was such a good town.

One thing I used to do at Clonmel, which I don't do anymore, was—even though I wasn't particularly religious—I used to love, when I was a bit down or whatever, just going and sitting in the Friary or St Peter and Paul's or St Mary's, but primarily the Friary, and just getting that sense of peace.

So sometimes when things are going a little bit awry, I do think about sitting in the Friary and having that peace and quiet and tranquillity.

So yeah, there's often times I think of Clonmel. Often, you know, you don't forget that and it's part of me.

Eileen: Absolutely. And they were your formative years.

Aileen: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think I was very lucky to be in that town and meet the people that I met, had the experiences that I had. Yeah. I would consider myself very lucky.

I made some lovely, lovely friends over the years living in Clonmel, and some of them I'm still in touch with, which is great.

Eileen: Does anything from Clonmel give you succour or support? Does it come into your consciousness?

Aileen: Clonmel does. It certainly never leaves you.

I think one of the biggest influences from living in Clonmel was—I knew an awful lot of very strong women, and I think that they've had an enormous impression on me.

And I think the impact of that has been that when I did come here, when I studied law, when I practised law, when I was in my own firm, etc., I never really had a concept that I couldn't do those things because I was female.

Where I do hear that a lot, and I think that came from the nuns, who very much instilled a sense of worth in us.

People I knew in Clonmel—some very strong women. Obviously my mum, but Mary Carey down the road is still, I believe, a source of amazing strength, strength in character.

Lily Carew is another one. Peg Rossiter was another one.

All of those women, I think, have had a real impact on me in terms of you just think you can do anything, and you can.

[Music]

Eileen: And do you think living overseas permanently has increased your sense of identity as being Irish?

Aileen: Yes. Yes, I think so, because, I mean, I've been here 39 years. But if I go back home, I am accused of having lost my accent, but here people pick up my accent still.

I identify as Irish first and then Australian. I'm a dual citizen. I have both, but I identify—my pride is in being Irish first.

It's also very handy in my job, because when I'm dealing with very difficult other lawyers, particularly older men, and I bring out the Irish accent, it works a treat.

So I still use that to my advantage.

And almost everybody's got an Irish relative, so you're able to get in, you know, you're able to kind of—they can't be nasty to you when you're going, "That name! You must have some relatives in Ireland," or "You must have had an Irish background," or whatever.

They can't keep being nasty to you. So it works beautifully.

Eileen: You work magic as well, Aileen.

Aileen: Yes, I think that bit of Irish really helps enormously.

Eileen: I know you've got very wide musical interests, but do you like Irish performers, composers?

Aileen: Absolutely. I was actually at the Blue Mountains Festival last weekend specifically to see Mary Coughlan, who was fantastic. She is—she's as good as she's ever been. She was wonderful.

Eileen: Fantastic.

Aileen: I love Mary Black, Frances Black, Christy Moore, Eleanor McEvoy. Yeah. So, love, love, love, love, love Irish music. I've always got that going.

Favourite songs—"Carrickfergus" would be one of my favourites. "The Town I Loved So Well" by Phil Coulter, "Katie" that Mary Black sings, like a heap of Mary Coughlan songs.

I love Eleanor McEvoy's album from a few years ago, *Alone*. There's so many.

Eileen: Yeah.

Aileen: So I frequently sing, well, I think some of them, but no, I enjoy listening to it a lot.

Aileen: "The sea is wide, and I cannot swim over. Neither have I the wings to fly. If I could find me a handsome boatman to ferry me over to my love and die."

Eileen: Brilliant. Do you play an instrument?

Aileen: I play guitar, very basically. I taught myself the basic chords a few years ago, and to be honest, I haven't picked up the guitar in a long time. I think it's somewhere in the house, probably with cobwebs. But yeah, so I used to do that.

I used to play piano. I'm pretty bad now. I'd have to start from scratch all over again, I think.

So I don't really—and I haven't had time. I mean, I've had 30 years of a really, really, really full-on legal career, and an awful lot of things went by the by because I simply didn't have time.

And it's only the last couple of years where I'm actually forcing myself to make the time to start enjoying things I really want to do, like going back to choir and things like that.

Eileen: The great thing is that your sense of fun and joy and friendship, and that you've managed to weave that—and the recognition now that you can sort of open up to what you love doing and making the time, because it's never too late.

Aileen: Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

One of the joys I've had recently was bringing together my friends from Ireland with my friends over here. It's been wonderful.

I've got some friends in one particular couple in Clonmel, and she's been talking to a really good friend of mine here for years, but they never met.

And they finally met up last September, and it was just so nice. Everybody just got on so well. It was like, "Wow, this is cool."

Eileen: Just thinking about your strengths, Aileen, which are many, what do you think that you've brought from what was developed within you from Clonmel?

Obviously, this sense of women being very important in your life.

Aileen: Mmm. Yeah. I suppose that development of the social awareness of being in a small town, being part of a community, that has kind of flowed on even though I'm in a big city now.

But I still, yes, keep a lot of those social connections going.

I like to mentor other girls and basically try and instill in them that sense of worth and that, you know, confidence that they can do anything.

I think that's really important.

I think I have a sense of—I'm fairly pragmatic and down to earth. I think that comes from being Irish. I think a sense of humour is very Irish.

I suppose an inherent sense of confidence having come, again, from a smaller community and being part of that community.

I love the peace and tranquility. I appreciate all of that from being in Clonmel. I regularly think about those quiet places.

We used to look up at the Holy Cross from where I lived in O'Connell Street, and the Comeraghs and all the beauty that surrounds you.

I think, with appreciation for beauty as well.

[Music]

Eileen: Did you bring anything from your childhood home that's still with you?

Aileen: Yes. I've got my Clonmel scrapbook. I took that with me from home.

I have the koala that my Auntie Aileen brought over from Australia when I was five months old. I brought it back to Australia and I still have that.

Eileen: That's an amazing journey for the koala.

Aileen: Oh, a very [laughs] amazing journey.

He hasn't got any eyes or anything anymore, but he's still hanging in there.

Eileen: He's much loved.

Aileen: Much loved.

I had some lovely pictures, sketches of the town that my mum sent out to me many years ago, and they're sketches of the old Main Guard and St Patrick's Well and the Friary. Still have them.

Got my parents' wedding album and stuff like that.

So yeah, there are things. And every so often I'll still bring out the Clonmel scrapbook, which is a very old version.

So I still absolutely have things from then.

Eileen: Wonderful. That's gold, as they say. Pure gold.

Aileen: Well, I was the lucky one, wasn't I?

Eileen: I think it is how we see things as well.

And I do think that Sean, while you didn't know him here on the physical plane, there's a sense that he has been a very strong influence. You do know him on a level.

And then, as the hearts who did know him here and loved him dearly, when they break, like—you know the line from Leonard Cohen, where the crack comes, the light enters.

And I don't think you ever lose that. You can't lose it, because it's opened. You've been opened.

Aileen: Yeah, I think that's right. And I suppose it's just part of you.

I—I haven't really spoken about Sean in years, because it's just part of you. It's not anything that you go out and say, "Oh, by the way, did you know what happened to me when I was young?"

It's, you know, it's nothing really that I think about on a day-to-day basis, but I still have his photograph in my bedroom.

And as well as my—I've got this row of dead people in.

Eileen: Yes.

Aileen: My mother and my father and my brother, etc. And yeah, and I look at all of them very fondly.

Eileen: So, thank you so much, Aileen, for joining me for this podcast, and wishing you great adventures in the times ahead, and goodness and radiance of health.

Aileen: Well, thank you so much for having me. It's been lovely. Good luck with the festival. I hope it all goes amazingly for you all.

Eileen: Thank you so much, Aileen. And we will be linking in with you and, you know, you now are part of the festival.

Aileen: Cool. I like it.

[Singing: The Parting Glass]

That was an episode of 'Loving and Leaving Clonmel'. A project by the Clonmel Junction Arts Festival in partnership with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

It was created by Artistic Director Rebecca Lenehan, with podcast consultant Siobhán McHugh and Tipperary Museum curator Marie McMahon.

Technical production is by Michal Durik, with original music composed by Eamon O'Malley.

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