

Writer Marie Walsh speaks to Stephen McMahon, who is now based in the UK having spent 20 years in China.

***Episode Description:** This wide-ranging episode follows Stephen's journey from Clonmel to the Middle East, China and the UK, capturing the curiosity and adaptability that shaped his life abroad.*

His affection for Clonmel and its people shines through, alongside a generous tribute to those who supported his path. Marie's reflections on her own time in Canada add a resonant parallel, while Chinese folk music enriches the account of his father's visit to China.

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 Marie Walsh speaks to Stephen McMahon, who is now based in the UK, having spent 20 years in China and in Saudi Arabia.

Stephen: I actually worked for Bin Laden. His family got the money from a civil engineering business, basically, right? So, we had a joint venture in Saudi Arabia with the Saudi Bin Laden Company to build our particular part of the plant.

Marie: You're about to meet Stephen McMahon, who was born and reared in Clonmel and, as an engineer, at the age of 25 he was asked if he'd work in Saudi Arabia. And little did he know that when he said yes, he'd never move back to Ireland again. And yet Stephen, to this day, remains very connected to Clonmel. But as he says himself, it's not so much about the place; he's connected to Clonmel because of the people.

Marie: Stephen, can you tell me about your experiences of growing up in Clonmel?

Stephen: Yeah, I was born in town, and I went to St. Mary's School, went to the High School, went to college, then in about 2002, then I left. First 25 years of my life, we'll say, I spent in Clonmel.

Always went back. I guess there's people who leave and then it's more of a cut-off and they don't go back as regularly. I always went back. I went back a couple of times a year, and I was back a few weeks ago and things like that. So it's not something that I ever—it never leaves you, you know.

Marie: That's amazing. So you kept that connection going. And I do have a sister who left and went to Canada, and I knew I was in Canada myself for nine years. And when she got there, it was like she took off her coat and said, "That's it, I'm never going back." Whereas I knew I'd always come back. So it's different, isn't it, when people leave, when they leave? Their relationship when they leave.

Can I ask where in Clonmel - where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Stephen: I grew up, lived most of my life still when I go back, in Ballingarrane... out by the Cahir Road. We spent most of my life, we'll say, since 1980.

Marie: That's pretty important years, your first 25 years, like, for anyone.

So I'm wondering, when you think back to that time of Clonmel, is there a particular place or a smell or a hobby that you had? What would be a strong memory, I suppose, for you from that time?

Stephen: Strong memory? I think the thing is, I'm still very close with all the friends I had from back in the day. So my friends - we say, both from around the area, so from the Cherrymount, Ballingarrane, Toberaheena, Western Road - like a lot of us are from that area.

And then when you get older in school, you hang around with kind of different people. Still have friends, and I still will meet with friends who I grew up with in the area, in Ballingarrane. People I went to school with in St. Mary's in primary school and people in the High School. Still meet them, still go back, and, you know, if I was going back next week, you might still get in touch with a couple of them.

So it's the people that are the connection. And now I don't go back as much. Like, I used to go back, we'd say, three or four times a year, and then that went back to about twice a year. And you see the town really change, so the places you don't necessarily have the connection to the places so much, but the people are still there, you know. It's the same people who you contact when you go back.

Marie: Yeah, I'm totally agreeing with you here. And the changes that you've noticed over the years, what are some of the changes that, I suppose, jumped out to you?

Stephen: The physical changes of the town. The way when I was there, and when I was a teenager, when I was in the High School, we'd walk over from the high school and then we'd walk over by the snooker hall, and then you'd walk around the block in the middle of the town.

And the centre of the town was still the centre of the town, if that makes sense. Whereas now when you go back, you have all the stuff on the outskirts of the town, all the shopping malls and all of that, and I guess the centre of the town is not—it doesn't seem as lively or as central as it was.

Marie: The first 24, 25 years of your life were in Clonmel. Where did you go from there and what made you go? And it was a big decision.

Stephen: One of the reasons is, there's a lot of people from Clonmel who will have the same journey as me, because I used to work for SEPAM, for Gus Kearney, and SEPAM. And there's a whole bunch of people who work for SEPAM or work for Kent, or work for Kent—some machination of all of these companies—who have worked in that industry, which is electrical contracting or something like that, and then through those companies have moved abroad.

So there's a lot of guys like me who have lives abroad all over the world and families abroad, who owe a lot of debt to people like Frank Kent, Gus Kearney and Noel Kelly. That's what I would think would be—where did the opportunity come from?

So I studied electrical engineering in Cork Institute of Technology. It wasn't that I wasn't ambitious, but I wasn't the most driven of people back then. I had no drive to go anywhere else or to leave the country.

I remember thinking that, you know, I'll get this qualification now and maybe I'll go work for the ESB or something like that.

And then through my father - he was a guard in Clonmel for 40 years and he was a detective, and he was towards the end of his career and he had a job, what they used to call the Ethnic Liaison Officer, in the Garda station. So if you were from outside of the EU, for example, and you needed your visa stamped or all of that stuff, you went down to the Garda station and you met Andy McMahon—

And one day, shortly after I qualified from college, somebody from SEPAM, Gus Kearney's company, went down to my father, and they had a bunch of people from a project in China who were going to come over to the office in Clonmel. And my father, of course, who was sick of paying for me, said to them, "Do you have any jobs for my young fella?"

And that was a Friday. He came back from work that day and he said, "I have a job interview for you." I think I went down the following day or something like that, and I started straight away.

I was interviewed by a guy called Tom Marry and Pat Kearney, who was Gus's son, and Pat's the owner of the company now.

So that was working in Clonmel for this company, which was an international company. And then one day I met Gus Kearney in the kitchen. Gus said, "I have to get you out of here", he said, "because you'll never learn your trade if you're stuck in Clonmel."

I said, "Okay, Gus, no problem."

And then within a couple of, I guess, weeks, I was on a plane to Saudi Arabia.

[Music]

Stephen: So then I was on a large, barren petrochemical site in Jubail on the east coast of Saudi Arabia. So that's what got me there.

It was guys like Gus Kearney and Frank Kent and Noel Kelly from Kent. You could do a podcast series on those guys on your own, because there's hundreds of people from Clonmel who got their start from those guys and are all over the world now.

I met them and I'm still in contact with lots of guys, guys like Ben Kane and all these guys who were in Germany, people all over the world who are still working in the same industry but got their start and got the opportunity through Kent.

Marie: Isn't that amazing? And I have to say, listening to you, I'd credit your father as well. It's like that moment that he knew in that moment to ask that question to the right person who set you on that path.

Stephen: Absolutely. Some of the people who worked for Gus, they knew my dad. Of course, he was a guard for 40 years, you know, so he knew everybody. You know, he knew a lot of people in the town. So that was the opportunity.

When I worked in the office, Gus had—I think there was three of us in the office who were young, we'll say graduates. But two of them were ahead of me, we'll say, because they had, we'd say, family connections to Kent. So they were—I had no connection to it, you know.

But two of them were asked ahead of me to go out on assignment, if you will. Like, one guy was asked to go somewhere and another guy was asked to go to Kazakhstan, I believe, and they both said no.

So then they ended up leaving the company because you can't really do the job from Clonmel, really, for all your career. So then he came to me and he asked me. I went, "Yeah, sure, you know, why not?"

You have to be open to the opportunity too, you know, because, I mean, there's lots of people when people say to them, "Will you go to a petrochemical site in Saudi Arabia?" They might not say yes. But you have to say yes and you've got to go for it.

Marie: And what about when you got to Saudi Arabia? How long did you spend there? And what was that like? You know, you're in your 20s, you find yourself completely different culture, different language.

Stephen: Yeah. It's funny because we were on the project a bit too early. So it was literally a flat desert site, right? You were in one of these kind of like a porta-cabin and you were there from 6:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the day, and there was just nothing there. Desert, extreme heat.

But you had great connection in the company. There was lots of people from Clonmel or from, certainly, from Ireland in the company, you know. So there was—like, you never felt like you were thrown overboard or anything like that, you know.

Even before I went, a guy called Tom Marry who worked for SEPAM, he rang me up, he talked me through it. He said, "You go to Terminal 4 and you take a left there, then you go down by there and then you get on the plane. And when you arrive in Bahrain, don't worry, there'll be somebody there for you," and someone collects you, you know.

So you had that connection back all the time to Clonmel. When other people were from Clonmel and Kent were there, even in Saudi Arabia at the time, in Jubail and Al Khobar, there was plenty of opportunity to meet people from Clonmel and from Ireland.

So you never felt like you were away from home and, you know, like that, that you were gone on your own. But it was certainly a very different country, a very different culture. You're working with people from all over the world for the first time in your life, from India, from the Philippines, from South Africa, and you're thrown into that environment.

Marie: Yeah, it's interesting, and I'm hearing almost a common theme already about the people. Like you said, you know, the location might change, but you were still staying connected to Ireland and to Clonmel through the people, which is amazing. How long did you end up staying there?

Stephen: Well, it's a somewhat funny story. We did the electrical work and the instrumentation work. They did the civil work and all the rest. So my badge said, " Stephen McMahon, Bin Laden Company."

Unfortunately, I lost that badge. I really wish I kept that over the years.

I stayed there for about—when the second project finished up, I went back to the head office, the SEPAM head office in Al Khobar. And this was around 2004.

And this was after the Second Gulf War, and there was a little bit of unrest in Saudi Arabia at the time, and Al-Qaeda had attacked the compound next to the compound where I was staying. And luckily I was in Clonmel at the time. I was on rotational leave, but they packed up all my stuff from Saudi Arabia, sent it back to Clonmel.

I stayed in the office in Clonmel for a few weeks and then they said to me, "Look, we have an office out in Shanghai. Would you like to go to Shanghai?"

And I was 28 years of age at the time and I just spent two years in Saudi Arabia. I was open to that change.

So that was how I got to Shanghai in July of 2004.

And I mean, back to the Clonmel story, my boss at the time, who met me—he was a guy from Bristol. He met me on the day and we went out and we had some dinner, and he said, "I'll bring you down to the local Irish pub in Shanghai."

I said, "Okay, great. No problem."

Went in the door, up to the bar, and the guy behind the bar was from Clonmel.

Marie: That's amazing. Like, there was Clonmel wherever you went so far in the story. Yeah. Here I was thinking we were going to talk about how he is still connected to Clonmel. It's like you never got away. And so how long did you spend out there, Stephen?

Stephen: So that was 2004. And then I just left China years ago. So I spent 20 years in China. Yeah. I guess my line is that I've met Muhammad Ali, I've met Bruce Lee, and I've met Disney's Peter Pan.

[Music]

Stephen: So Muhammad Ali was a welder from Kerala who I worked with in Saudi Arabia. Bruce Lee was a business development executive who I met when I worked for a company in Beijing. And my current company now, we were involved in building the Disneyland in Shanghai.

And you wouldn't believe it, but our structural engineer was called Peter Pan. So I worked with Disney's Peter Pan. So there you go.

Marie: That is brilliant. Love that. Love that. Like I mentioned at the start, I spent nine years in Canada and that was my 20s and it does leave its kind of mark.

You've spent two decades, right? How has that been for you? What impact has that had on you, would you say?

Stephen: Work in foreign countries all your life, especially if they're so different, like Saudi Arabia and China, is you have to show respect.

And it's a funny thing. The Irish are very good abroad.

So if you meet any Irish people in China, in Saudi Arabia, they generally get on very well and they—I don't know—acclimatise, I suppose, is the word.

Whereas people from other countries, and it's generally the bigger countries and the more historical countries, they can find it harder. I think they find it harder to adapt and they find it harder to get on with it.

And from my perspective, you have to show respect for someone's culture, and you've got to be aware of where you are and be aware of your own cultural biases, I suppose. You have to be curious as well, I think.

I think it's for the people who go abroad and they're not that curious in where they are, and they're not that interested. If they don't respect the culture, you'll find it difficult and you probably won't last.

You know, I mean, I've worked with people over the years who, especially in China, they come into China and they have a different approach. It doesn't work and you don't last.

Marie: Yeah, that's fair enough. And when you moved then from China, did you move from there then to the UK?

Stephen: Yeah, so I'm still working for the same company I worked for in China for the last 15 years. So I asked them if I could get a transfer back to our office in the UK to try and be closer to home, and they agreed.

So then I just moved back in 2024. The economy in China is not as good as it was. I'm getting older myself. I've got two kids and my parents were getting older. Family and friends still in Clonmel.

You start to get tired of missing things, I suppose. And then you kind of said, "Okay, maybe it's time to come back closer to home."

Marie: So that's why—I was wondering, why didn't you come directly back? But I hear what you're saying. You looked at the company, where's the nearest office? And then that's how you got yourself to the UK.

Stephen: My wife is Chinese, my wife is from Shanghai, and she was working for a company as well, and her office—her company transferred her over as well. So she was able to go into that office in London.

So we were both able to make that transition out of China and kind of keep it a bit easier at the time. If we were to go back to Clonmel, you know, you'd be looking for jobs and all the rest of it, make it difficult.

Marie: I mean, that's pretty incredible that it could work out for you both. I'm delighted for you that that worked out so well, that you both could do that.

You had mentioned earlier that maybe in the beginning you came back to Clonmel maybe more often and then it might have been, let's say, once a year or when you could come back over. So what has it been like now that you're in the UK in the past year?

Do you find—I know you're physically closer—do you find you are making more trips to come back?

Stephen: So when you're young and when you're single, you can do whatever you want. You know what I mean? And I think the most I would come back four times a year.

But then when you get married and you have kids and the kids are in school and things like that, you can't move back or you can't go back as much.

But then when I came back to the UK, I thought, ah sure, I'll pop over now. And, you know, but it's not as easy for various reasons. I think it's more expensive, till I realised it is, for sure.

I had great notions of going back every couple of weeks and, you know, going to different places, and then you kind of realised the cost of the travel as well from the UK is crazy, which I didn't appreciate.

Marie: Stephen's dad sadly passed away last year in 2025, but he comes back to spend time with his mam, who still lives in the same house where he grew up, and his childhood bedroom is even there. Stephen also comes back to visit other close friends and family.

Stephen: All my friends are still there, more or less, you know, the guys I grew up with. So, and my friends' families are still there and their kids are just going off to college and things like that.

So there's still a lot of connection back to the town, whereas I do know people over the years, when they leave, they can lose the connection pretty quick. And it happens, you know.

But I've been lucky, you know. It's easy for me to go back and it's easy for me to kind of fit into the whole place again.

[Music]

Stephen: The place changes and you don't recognise a lot of things outside of that group of people, we'll say. If I walk down the town, I probably won't recognise too many people, but I still have that group of friends and family who I can call on when I go back.

Marie: One of the things that came up was this idea of maybe a typical day. How has that idea of a typical day changed depending on where you were living?

Stephen: A typical day in Saudi Arabia back in the day was you get up at 5:00 in the morning and you're living in a camp or a secluded area, and then you go get your breakfast and then you're on site at 6:00, and then you're on a petrochemical site for 12 hours a day.

So that's the glamour of Saudi Arabia.

In China, I lived quite close to the office of the company I worked with in Shanghai. And Shanghai, I mean, I don't know what people's perception of it is, but it's an absolutely beautiful city, and it's very—it's extremely safe, extremely modern.

I'd get up in the morning, I would bring my oldest daughter down to the bus stop, and I'd drop her off at about 7:15. She would get a little bus over to her school, and then I would walk up through the office.

There was a beautiful park, sort of like a smaller version of Central Park in New York. I'd walk through that park for about 15 minutes and then I'd come out the other side and there'd be a Starbucks on the other side.

And I'd order it all on my phone before I got there, and you'd walk in the door to the Starbucks and somebody would hand you your coffee, and then you go into this modern office building and you press the button to go up to your office, and you're in a lovely office in Shanghai, and then you're doing whatever engineering work that you have to do for that day.

Most of the day in Shanghai was living in a sort of modern city life, but it's quite a well-planned city. It's quite a nice city, so you don't feel like it's congested and all of that.

Now in London then, it's very different. I take the train to work and all the things like that.

I would think the big difference is, after 20-something years working abroad, it's coming back and having to adapt to, for want of a better expression, working in the West again. That was a big challenge that I had, you know, because you're—I was so ingrained with working in the Chinese culture and in the Saudi culture before that, where you have to act in a certain way.

You have to respect the culture. You cannot speak out of turn, but you learn how things work in that environment, and then after 20-something years, you come back into the environment which is essentially your own culture, and it can be challenging.

Marie: You're almost describing it like it was easier to adapt to there than it was coming back and then adapting back in.

Stephen: Yeah. There was a certain way of working when you're living in a place like China, that you know it's a hierarchical culture. You know how to get things done.

And then you come back here to the West and people are very different. People have a very different way of working here in the UK, you know.

And, of course, another thing is that I'm 20-something years older as well, so—and there's a whole new generation of people who've come along who are now—you have to work with.

And, yeah, I guess it's just a bit different to what I'm used to. I'm used to dealing with people, I guess, who have travelled the world and who've lived in an international environment.

And then suddenly you're gone back to here and it's people who maybe never left their home country, who've never left that little bubble that they grew up in.

And those type of people can have a different overview on how to work than you would yourself.

[Music]

Marie: And this might seem like a funny question, but part of this project we are introducing this idea of objects. You know the way sometimes when you're away from home or when you're living abroad, you might have something that reminds you of home.

Is there anything that has gone with you?

I actually have a pair of—it's like Irish whiskey glasses that I got as a teenager, and even though I've probably moved 20 times and lived in so many different places and countries, I still have them. You know, it's like something I've taken with me.

Stephen: I know some people, when they go abroad, for example, like the community in China, in Shanghai, was pretty small and pretty—maybe, I don't know, maybe a couple of hundred people or something like that—and a lot of people would bring packets from home and Barry's Tea and Taytos and all of that kind of stuff.

I was never one for that. I think when you go somewhere, you try to, you know, enjoy the local culture and the local things. So I was never one for having too many connections back and things like that.

And once—it's a funny thing that you say it, for example, at Christmas, in the weeks going up to Christmas, you'd be looking forward to going home, you know, and you'd be looking forward to going back.

But once you arrive back into China or into Saudi Arabia, your mindset most certainly—mine does anyway—changes a little bit and you think, okay, we're back in China, we're back in Shanghai, we're back in Beijing, wherever I was, and you kind of get on with that and you go back into that life.

But then people will give you things over the years, you know. Like, my mother gave me a t-shirt there about a year ago where it has a big well on it, you know.

So [laughter] that always reminds me of Clonmel.

She'll send me a Tipperary mug or something like that. So I do have those kind of little trinkets that you have in the house or have in the office and things like that.

Marie: Since you lived in Saudi Arabia, China and then the UK, have you kept anything from Saudi Arabia or China that reminds you of that place?

Stephen: Saudi Arabia—I remember I bought a copy of the Quran, a very nice, you know, bound copy of the Quran. So that's at home somewhere.

One of the nice things about China as well was I was able to bring my father over, and I brought him to the Great Wall and I brought him to Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City.

So there's lots of stuff back in the house, up on the walls—just Chinese calligraphy and things like that. So there is a lot of connections back to China still.

Marie: Is there anything else that you would like to add, Stephen? Like, when you look back on this, that's been some adventure, right? Are you glad it's all worked out that way? Was there anything you would have done differently?

Stephen: I probably would have spent a bit more time learning Chinese if I could. That's one that I didn't - I can speak a little bit of Chinese, you know, at kind of a conversational level, but I guess in the early years, if I'd spent more time and more concentration on that, it'd be nice.

Would I change anything? No. No. It's funny the way the opportunities line up. If you're open to them, they just line up. I wouldn't change a thing.

I mean, because it's a Clonmel podcast, the only thing that I'd say to you is about, you know, what I started with, like with guys like Frank Kent and Noel Kelly and Gus Kearney there. So many people around the world have so much in debt to those guys.

I don't think I would have left the country if I didn't get the opportunity, and certainly from that opportunity came opportunities.

I would think that those guys are really—you know, from Clonmel, those were the guys with the vision back in the day, you know.

Gus Kearney was in the Middle East in the '80s. He was in China in the '90s. Decades before other people. Decades, not years.

And these are guys from Clonmel who had that vision and gave fantastic opportunities then to guys like me who came along afterwards.

[Music]

Marie: The recurring theme in Stephen's story is that it's all about the people. Part of that is meeting the right people at the right time. You know, someone who sees something in you that you may not even see in yourself, and that person who maybe even opens the door and says, "Come on in."

And it was really great to hear even Stephen's experience of Clonmel people abroad, who are looking out for each other.

What I also heard is how Stephen is so connected to family and friends. And it's really through them that he remains strongly connected to Clonmel.

Today, Stephen lives just outside of London and he's still working as an engineer. He lives with his wife Jangena, who is from Shanghai, and his two lovely girls, Zoe, aged 11, and Ava, aged 4.

And at the time of our chat, he was preparing for a trip back to Clonmel to visit friends and family.

I'm grateful to Stephen for taking the time to chat with me, and I'd like to thank you for listening to this podcast.

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.

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