

Writer Paul Harrison speaks to Desmond Doyle, who is now based in a tiny Alpine village in Austria.

Episode Description: *This tightly scripted episode captures Desmond's wide range of talents and achievements, brought to life through his energy, enthusiasm and personal performances.*

Paul's narration weaves together his artistic, political and community involvement into a coherent and engaging portrait, enriched by thoughtful commentary throughout.

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 Paul Harrison speaks to Desmond Doyle, who is now based in a tiny Alpine village in Austria.

Paul: Ireland has a tradition of missionaries. Desmond Doyle continues the tradition into the 21st century.

[Music]

The words recall the tragic loneliness of one of Cromwell's people. It's eerie to sense the sadness of a man who was jailed in Clonmel centuries ago. After generations of foreign occupation, for some, Ireland still seems a prison.

Everyone has a tale to tell. Let's hear Desmond's.

[Music] "Come listen to me, I'll tell you a story."

Desmond Doyle is proud to be Irish. But like many who felt the need to escape the land of their birth, he found the freedom to grow and express himself once away from Ireland. He was accepted by the people of Austria, where he now lives among those who appreciate him.

Desmond: I live in a town with 900 inhabitants. My house was built in 1550. So it's three stories, massive old stone building. I spent a lot of time doing it up in that style.

And when I wake up in the morning, I look at the Alps, 2,200 metres.

Paul: Desmond's life hasn't always been so luxurious. He grew up in simpler circumstances.

Desmond: My grandparents, the Whelan's, were always from Clonmel. So they go way back.

My father came down from Dublin and joined the Army in Clonmel, where they met my mother, and then they got married and they lived for some time in Garrymore, and then they moved to Pearse Park, where all the family were born.

I went to St. Peter and Paul's Primary School and then to the technical school in Clonmel.

Yeah, lots of good memories, lots of good times. I just love listening to music. I was more into sports because we had a lot of people in the house and there was no place to play an instrument.

So I spent a lot of time in the sports fields, but I was always singing on the buses when we were going to places with Clonmel Athletic Club.

Paul: Life wasn't easy in the '60s, the swinging '60s they were known as, but not everyone was swinging.

Desmond: Yeah. Well, at the time there were very little opportunities.

Paul: Des left the family home to seek his fortune.

Desmond: It was a good thing that I left because we all lived together in a small house and I was restless there. So I decided to just travel around a little bit.

I think my mother was happy to see the back of one of us.

Like, the ladies back then had a really hard time. I have great respect for my family and for my mother especially, because my father died when he was 43 and my younger brother was born a few days later, and she had a whole house full of teenagers and a new child.

And then I managed to get through my Leaving Cert and then I decided to leave.

But at that time the women were very resilient, and they all helped each other. There was amazing sort of empathy in the society, and if somebody had a problem, all helped each other, you know. That was great.

A lot of young people had to leave. There was absolutely no work there, you know. It was very difficult.

Paul: The soft slopes of the Comeraghs are a far cry from the snow-capped Alps where he lives now.

Desmond: I love the countryside. I was always in the countryside. I spent a lot of time up in the Comeraghs, cycling and running.

Paul: Ireland's gentle green pastures weren't challenging enough for Des. He sought higher mountains to climb.

Desmond: I left Ireland when I was 17 and I went to Wales and I became an electrician and went to Bridgend College of Technology in Wales.

I was about 21, 22.

Paul: Desmond fell in love with an Austrian teacher called Maria. They married and settled in Austria in a tiny Alpine village.

Desmond: I was going to buy a house in Ireland and the houses were really cheap, but I decided to buy a house here in Austria first. And by the time I got around to having that one paid for, the prices went mad in Ireland, so I didn't.

Paul: Life wasn't easy. He grasped every opportunity that life offered.

Desmond: I had my first job when I got to Austria and got married.

Paul: Des had been taught Irish in school, but the other languages of Europe were considered less important.

Desmond: The language barrier was a big thing, and the Austrians are very, very suspect about people who don't come from Austrian or German-speaking countries, because at the time there was a big influx of workers from the ex-Habsburg countries, and nearly every third or fourth person was a foreigner.

And people tended to think to themselves, but I was the only Irish person. I spent four years at one stage and didn't meet an Irish person in four years.

Paul: Things changed for Des when he was asked to sing in a pub.

Desmond: I was having a few beers one night and there was a pretty well-known band and they were doing a session or a concert, and they asked me if I would sing a few songs, and I did.

And then about three or four weeks later we were invited to Vienna and we got a recording contract, which was something unbelievable at the time.

I got a lot of money from writing because I wrote most of the songs.

[Music] "When the hands that held you tight, long since dead and gone, you ask yourself why this is so, what has happened and what has gone wrong.

If you could change it all, what would you try and say?"

Paul: Des discovered a talent for songwriting and performing. None of us know what life holds in store. One thing led to another, and his fame spread.

Desmond: Well, I was pretty well known in places. Lots of television shows and stuff, and then people treat you differently.

And then, you know, it's all sort of a blown-up sort of thing. That's that thing with being famous. It just comes and goes. You're only as good as your last bad song.

Paul: Des kept a cool head as he performed throughout Austria. He never forgot where he came from. He misses the Irish way of life. After 50 years, he still maintains contact with friends in Clonmel.

His children are Austrian, but..

Desmond: We always speak English in the family, with my grandchildren as well, who are also very good English speakers.

I think if you assimilate too much into society, you lose yourself. And I do as much as I can. And I've done a lot here. A lot of things started through me in this country.

But I'm still Irish, and I make that quite clear in every interview and in my heart, still Irish. I've made Ireland pretty well known around here.

The Austrian newspapers wrote I'm "an Irish army taking over this part of Austria."

Paul: Through friends in Clonmel. He plays a part in expanding Ireland's export to Austria.

Desmond: Lots of people are selling Guinness and all sorts of things around here now.

Oh Jesus. I'd murder a few pints now and again. I had a few pints down St. Patrick's night, by the way.

The Irish people say the Irish people drink. They have nothing on these guys.

I mean, it's not unusual here after your breakfast to see people open up a beer, having a pint, because beer is looked upon not as a drink. It's just looked upon as a beverage with a little bit of alcohol in it.

Paul: Des and his family are active members of the community.

Desmond: My son lives in a beautiful city of Graz, which is Austria's second-biggest city, and my daughter lives in the twin town of Clonmel, which is called Trofaiach, which I organised 25 years ago.

And she has a beautiful house here and a young child, and her husband works for me as well. And we have a cultural centre here.

Paul: Des has learned to relax Austrian style, where the activities are mainly winter sports.

Desmond: You've got skiing, that's probably the big one. There's all different sort of disciplines. You've got downhill, you've got slalom, cross-country, and now they're very, very good mountain climbers and climbers in general.

Lots of other different things like curling. My neighbour was actually Olympic champion back in 1976. He won the Olympics for downhill skiing.

Paul: There's a big difference between curling and hurling. Des misses the energy of GAA, which the Austrians find scary.

Desmond: I have a hurley and two or three sliotars, and my grandchildren, I got them hurleys from Ireland. And when they get on my nerves, I take them out for a game of hurling and batter 'em.

[Laughter]

Football, we think, but they're feckin' useless.

Paul: So is there a GAA club nearby?

Desmond: No. Well, I wouldn't get the people to do it. Austrians would be afraid of it because all their sports, they're all covered in things, you know. Like, even in ice hockey.

But I show them a hurling match.

No, they wouldn't go for that now. And I said, "Sure, the insurance companies wouldn't go for it either."

I haven't seen a match in years and years, a live match.

And I also miss friends, but later in life, I got a lot of my friends to come here, musicians to come on tour and all different things.

So I have lots of connections back home.

Paul: Now, through the years, Des and his friends have organised informal trade between Ireland and Austria.

Desmond: They order stones, for example, for building. There are stonemasons that order from the quarries in the west of Ireland, and also beverages, food, sausage.

I used to supply Irish pubs here in Austria about 20 years ago. I supplied all the Irish pubs with all the Irish stuff, beer and alcohol, and I sold that off then and opened the bar.

A lot of people came into my place from all over because I was pretty well known. But they also came in because we were speaking English there, and my waitresses were from Cashel and from Dublin. I got people in from Ireland to run the place for me.

It's a thing you have to be born for. It wasn't for me. Taking up too much of my time in the one room. I don't like to be stuck in small...

The best part of being in a bar is at the side of the bar where you're getting served and not doing the serving.

Paul: So he sold it to an Austrian lady.

Desmond: And she turned it into a coffee shop, because I told her, "Why? How could you open an Irish pub? You know nothing about the culture. You were never there."

Paul: For all that he misses Ireland, he is aware of the advantages of living in Austria.

Desmond: I think the system here is amazing. I mean, when you go to work, and if you're self-employed or if you're a worker, if you're a social servant, doesn't matter what job you're in, a part of your wages is taken out of your pay to pay your health security and your social security, which includes your pension.

And depending on what you were earning, you get a very, very good health coverage. Nearly everything is free.

And also kindergarten is great for children. And then you've got the schools. And I see my own kids working at school and I think the educational system is fantastic.

Another thing about Austria is the maternity leave. My wife had the baby and she can stay out of work for two years with full pay, which is amazing, you know.

Paul: The benefits of Austria go beyond government services and Des plays a role in helping people. He has the courage to make things happen.

Desmond: So we rock the boat. That's most important for me, is to rock the boat.

I'm a European Integration Ambassador. I stood on a vineyard hill and saw all the refugees coming through Slovenia. I've never seen so many people.

[Music]

There were 500,000 people in a line that moved into Austria and then onto Germany. They were taken to old schools and tents and army quarters and things that were made available.

And in the shortest of time, the first influx were all put into accommodation. A lot of them moved on. Some of them were sent back, and then a lot of them have assimilated quite well in the meantime.

Paul: Knowing how Irish emigrants had suffered, his sympathies came to the full.

Desmond: I started an organisation called Art Mine. I've started a lot of different things, but I think it was called the Club for Integration and also for cultural activities.

And I spent a lot of time running gigs, concerts for refugees, but with their music and with their cultural stuff as well.

There were three Nobel laureates here and talk was on about, not just the refugees, but about peace in general.

We have a three-story mill that was going to be pulled down by the local council, and the woman actually gave it to us, and it's a beautiful place. Lots going on there.

Concerts, exhibitions, all different things going on. It's a beautiful place called the Simon Mühle, Simon's Mill. It was an old flour mill.

They've got young people, academics, and they're really, really good people, very interested in getting things done in the town, in the city here.

You know, I had lots of Irish people over, like Ken Horne, Dom O'Driscoll, Joe Farrell.

Paul: While he works hard to help the Austrian community, he brings Austrian tourists to Ireland.

Desmond: I do a lot of tourism there. I've had the Talbot Hotel since years, I've been working with them when it was called, the Park Hotel.

And this year I've got 90 tourists who are staying for a week, flying to Dublin, get a bus from Clonmel or from around Tipperary somewhere, and then hire them for a week to take us around on day tours and then back to the airport and fly back into Vienna.

Paul: It's a changing world and immigration is an issue for all of us.

Desmond: We should become more aware of where we all come from. A lot of our families, and that means all of us, that means everybody except those who were well off, all had people who emigrated, and they all went to different countries and some of them found roots there. Some of them didn't.

I love Ireland. I love what Ireland stands for, and we shouldn't become a fascist state or like some countries around here.

I spend a lot of time thinking about these things because I am a very reclusive person. I'm also a very sociable person, but I spend a lot of time on my own in the mountains.

That's what I do because I know how privileged I am that I can live like this. I'm not lonesome. I like being alone.

[Music]

I think we should open our eyes to the things that are going on at the moment.

We went from a very poor country to a very wealthy country. And some things are good about it, some things are bad about it.

And I know that the Irish are a very hospitable people and also very generous people. So I would like people just to keep their minds away from just hating people.

Paul: Austria has been good to Desmond, but part of him will always be in Clonmel.

One thing that living away from Ireland has given Des is a deep understanding of what it's like to be an immigrant. He knows the hardships and challenges of being away from his place of birth and devotes much of his life to caring for others who have wound up on foreign shores.

He's happy knowing he's helping people.

Desmond: In 2015, the European Capital of Culture was in Slovenia, and the company I started got a contract to paint a huge mural.

And we hired the Bogside Artists of Derry to come down and paint the mural. And then three Nobel laureates, with the Dalai Lama, unveiled the mural.

It's 150 metres long.

And I was in Russia, with that, out into Kyiv, in Greece, in Spain, Slovenia, Serbia, Italy, and Austria four or five times. And I'm looking for artists to join.

And when it's finished, we're going to give the whole thing to Doctors Without Borders to be exhibited all over the world in the coming years.

A lot of people do things, you know, if they're asked properly.

Paul: It seems Des' good work is only starting.

Desmond: I've got a lot of energy left.

[Laughter]

I think it's important. The minute you give up on life, you're gone.

[Music] *"You've time. Come listen to me. I'll tell you a story about a town so far away. A town I love so well.*

Lies in the middle of the lovely Golden Vale. The poets gave it the name rare Clonmel.

There I saw the light of day, saw the seasons change, went to school, fell in love, had my share of hell. And when I think back on the days of my life, I spent the best of them in rare Clonmel.

Gangs, we roamed the streets at night, dreaming we were heroes. Playing games, living fantasy. I remember some so well.

And the girls who sweetened up the long lonely nights. There are some pretty ones, in rare Clonmel.

I think about my old school friends, the four winds that embraced them, running the streets at night.

Every sound and every smell are imprinted in the depths of my soul.

Child of that lovely town, rare Clonmel."

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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