

Writer Rosaleen Quinlan speaks to Una McDonald, who is now based in Toronto, Canada.

Episode Description: *In this evocative episode, Rosaleen guides Una through memories of her childhood in Clonmel, painting a vivid picture of the town's close-knit community, from Fair Day excitement to religious processions.*

A rendition of Queen of the May and the lowing of cattle bring these memories to life, while Una reflects on her journey from Clonmel to Canada and the lasting influence of home on her life.

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 Rosaleen Quinlan speaks to Una McDonald, who is now based in Toronto, Canada.

Una: When I get together now, I go home about twice a year. When I get together with the brothers, they very often say that we were very lucky to grow up in such a great town. But Clonmel had everything you could want for culturally, sporty, you know, sport-wise — anything. It was in the town. Music, opera, Irish dancing, whatever you wanted, it was there.

Rosaleen: Una McDonald, or Una Lonergan as she was then, was born in Clonmel and grew up there in the late '60s and '70s. She's lived in Canada now for the last 45 years and enjoys Toronto for its great mix of cultural activities, music, and access to the great outdoors.

These are actually the same things she enjoyed in Clonmel in her childhood, where sport, music and dance thrived. As a young girl, Una played the part of a little demon in a production of the opera Faust. While most local people didn't have the means to travel much then, there was a vibrant life right in the heart of the town.

Rosaleen: Una, I think you were the only girl in the family.

Una: Exactly, because I'm number four of eight, and the rest of them are all boys. I have seven brothers and I'm the only girl. Everyone assumed I was spoiled. I always said I was special. I wasn't spoiled because I had to do my share of household chores. I had to fight my corner, and many a tear was shed. But anyway, we got through it.

Rosaleen: There were lots of families with kids on Gladstone Street at that time.

Una: A lot of them sort of in and around our age, which was kind of nice. I guess the parents must have been similar ages, but we had all the children of the shopkeepers along the street that we could play with. It was difficult, actually, because we were on the street. None of us really had what we call a back garden, and you did end up being out on the street quite a bit.

[sound of children playing]

Well, there was a lane across the way that we played in quite a bit.

Even though we were on the street, we got into roller skating and playing marbles and hopscotch and bicycling — all those things you kind of did on the front street, which was probably hair-raising for our parents.

[laughter]

Rosaleen: And where did you live on Gladstone Street?

Una: Do you know where McDonald's is now in Clonmel? That was Sutton's Coal, and it was a hardware store fronted with a hardware store, and then there was all kinds of grains and coal and everything down the back in the backyard. Every store was wide open and everything was there.

Sutton's Coal was where I was living, and that was hardware, which led next to the butcher, and then there was O'Connor, the fish shop, and then Simpson's, the beautiful grocery store, and so it went right around into O'Connell Street. The other side there was Moran's, the chemist, and around to several beautiful bakeries, the Co-op, Woolworth's, Burke's Bacon. It just seemed to be a thriving, bustling town.

Rosaleen: So all the shops you needed were right there in town.

Una: And that was a big part of our life.

Because the kids, we were sent for messages. Funny, we always laugh about when you'd be sent for a pound of sausages to Burke's Bacon, and you had to come back with the pound that had 16 sausages, not 14, because 16 would be enough for two sausages each for the kids, you know, and my father probably got a chop.

But, you know, it was like everybody, I think, in that main street knew us, because we were always taking turns going around to the shop.

But lots of eight- to ten-kid families.

Yeah, they did. They all had to be very resourceful, I think.

Rosaleen: Yeah. Amazing women.

Una: Absolutely. To make things stretch, you know.

[Music]

Una: My mom was a blow-in, as they called it back then, from Dundalk, and that was an adjustment for her. Can you imagine, like, how many people travel now, but to come from Dundalk to Clonmel was like a huge change, you know? God bless my mother, managed to mind eight of us in that premises with no garden or anything, you know, so it was hard going, but we got through.

And we were lucky enough that my father was from Lisronagh, and that's where he was born and raised. My uncle was out there managing the farm that he grew up on, and we'd go out there. Some of us would go out for several days for vacation; others would just be day trips. But it was really nice to have that escape.

Rosaleen: Things were a little bit different, I suspect, on the farm than in town.

Una: Yes. And yeah, going for water and everything. Can you imagine? There was no running water. And my brothers tried to scare me lots of times. We had to go out at night to the

outhouse to the bathroom, you know, and they'd sort of go out and wait for you and jump out on top of you. [laughter]

Rosaleen: Did you go to school in the Sisters of Charity?

Una: First, yeah. And then the Loreto, then the Loreto, yeah. It's probably changed a lot from my time, I'm sure.

Rosaleen: Did you like school?

Una: Yes, for the most part, yeah. Academically, I did okay. And then in Loreto I was in the orchestra and I did piano lessons. I played hockey. I had a lot of interests in school.

Rosaleen: The nuns were quite strong in music in Loreto.

Una: They were. Yeah. We had a full orchestra. Yeah. It was really nice. Yeah. I was on the violin very badly.

I think I brought it home, I brought home the violin once to practice at home, and I think my mother nearly fell down laughing. It was screeching so much.

Rosaleen: You were fairly interested in tennis. You spent a lot of time in Hillview.

Una: Hillview was huge. I think every one of us joined Hillview, and not only did we do the tennis, there was the pitch and putt. And again, my brother Kieran reminded me that we were at the discos there. They had discos in Hillview as well as they had discos in the Island.

Rosaleen: Yeah. Then, as now, there were lots of active clubs and societies in Clonmel.

Una: Yes, there was a lot going on. I mean, gosh, I think she was well known in the town — Miss O'Meara's Irish Dance School, St. Mary's Choral Society. I mean, anything. And then there was the Irish céilís at night as well. So, lots of things going on, and they brought their school... and yeah, you'd go down there for a meagre amount of pence and have your lesson. Yeah. Oh, they were great.

I think they had to put discipline on us because, you know, a bunch of little ones, just, you know, unruly probably. So lots of places to get out and enjoy yourself, for sure.

Rosaleen: People gathered for different processions throughout the year — in May, for Corpus Christi in June, and in August, the walk to the cross.

Una: Clonmel had, you know, an annual pilgrimage up to the cross, which would be around the August Bank Holiday, and a huge amount of people in the town would come out for that. And then there was the May processions and the Corpus Christi processions in June, and they were a big part of the town as well.

And when I was seven, I actually did crown Our Lady. So that was quite an event for me. It was one of the processions where you parade through the town and you were on display, and then you ended up in the church and crowning Our Lady. That was eventful. I think by virtue of the fact that I had so many brothers, they picked me for that job.

[Music and singing: 'Queen of the May']

Rosaleen: At Christmas time, there was a less solemn procession: the Santa parade.

Famous Clonmel bandleader Mick Delahunty and his fellow musicians would play from a float which paraded through town, with the local children running along beside it in high excitement.

Una: Yes. There was a truck that Mick Del and Billy Kenrick, who played the organ in the local St. Peter and Paul's Church, they'd be on the back of the truck and just making merry on Christmas Eve. The truck would travel all the way down to Ferryhouse, and that was quite an occasion for the town.

We had Féile Cluain Meala too, do you remember that? Well, the Feis every year, you know, there was singing and dancing, all kinds of things, and a lot of the people in the town would enter. I think most people ended up getting a medal at some point in their time in it, but it was a fun thing to be part of.

Rosaleen: Lots of things don't change. I'm guessing as kids you loved a trip to the beach, like kids do now.

Una: Tramore or Clonea, then. We often depended on friends to get us down there. I remember we'd be thrilled if a friend invited you to go to the seaside, because it was hard for us all to go.

Rosaleen: There were two cinemas in Clonmel then.

Una: There were two main theatres: the Oisin and then the Regal was down the other end of town. The Oisin Theatre up in O'Connell Street went up in flames while I was right there in Gladstone Street.

And that was terrifying because it felt like the whole street, O'Connell Street, had gone up in flames. It was almost like the end of the world. The flames were shooting up into the air. It was incredible.

Yeah, it was terrifying.

Yeah, it really was. I remember my mother was petrified too, and of course she passed it on to the rest of us that were there. The window that we were able to look out the back — you could see the whole street. It looked like the whole street was on fire.

Rosaleen: Wasn't there a fire at the dance hall as well, at Collins Hall?

Una: It did. It did as you know, it went up in flames as well, and that was quite a traumatic time for the town, really, because it was quite a huge fire, and they were very scared that it would spread to Mulcahy's, which was close by, and there was the fish and chip shop there, Mattasses

and everything. Some of those had to come over and get out of their premises. They came over to our house. Yeah.

And my mom made tea and whatever she had for the firemen. Yeah.

Rosaleen: For those who haven't heard of it, coursing is a sport which involves the chasing of hares with greyhounds, where the dogs are tested on their ability to run and to turn a hare. In Ireland, the national coursing meeting is held in February each year at the racecourse in Clonmel. It's still a major event, but in the 1970s, when Una was a child, it was a huge festival in the town.

Una: The coursing was a big part of our family. Clonmel was legendary for the coursing, and people from all around the country, especially Dundalk where my uncle was, they'd all come down and we'd have to house a whole bunch of them for the coursing. And yeah, it was quite an event in February, yeah, every year.

Rosaleen: Did you have lots of visitors and have to put them up and everything? It must have been very busy for your mother.

Una: She was a great woman for getting out the frying pan, rashers and sausages and the whole bit. Yeah, no, she was fantastic. Yeah, it was great. But I think everybody enjoyed it.

And my brother Kieran was big into the greyhounds, and having been out in the country with my uncle, he won the coursing in 2002 with a dog called Limousine, because he named him after our surname, Lonergan, and gave him an L, you know, a name beginning with L.

And the other thing that I remember as a child was going out to the Cahir Road for the Brassey Cup. It was open coursing. We'd go out and you had to help raze the hares. We just loved going out through the fields razing the hares. And the best part, of course, was afterwards when you got sandwiches and buns were given to all who helped out.

It was a huge part of growing up was greyhounds. I guess some families, it was really part of their life. We embraced it. We loved it.

Rosaleen: On the Fair Day in the town, the sounds of the countryside came to the streets, literally.

Una: I remember it well, and all the cattle and, you know, the mess that they would make, and horses and cows. And how the night before — it was always on a Wednesday — and on a Tuesday night they had to board up the premises of the whole street, really, to try and make sure that no glass was broken or windows broken.

Yeah, and I remember it well, and it was quite an occasion. And they also had little stalls where you could go and buy things. And I remember being intrigued by that, you know, wishing I had money because I was quite young.

Rosaleen: Speaking of money, Una told us how she and some of her brothers used to make some money as teenagers.

Una: As we got older, we would go work for Bulmers, you know, to pick the currants. I had at least two brothers who picked the apples for Bulmers. It was hard work picking, both jobs, but I remember you had to try and get at least four pails of currants every day. That was your target. And it was very hard filling a bucket with currants. [laughter]

We'd cycle down and you'd be filthy after them. I had a few friends that we'd cycle down together, and we'd challenge each other, you know, to fill our buckets more. Then you'd have to get them weighed, and we'd help each other if they didn't make the weight.

And, oh, it was just, yeah, it was hard, but we loved it. I think we tried to get a pound a day, you know, to earn a pound.

Rosaleen: Once she left school, Una did a course in Dublin.

Rosaleen: Was it a big change, Una, moving to the big city after Clonmel?

Una: It was a bit of a jump, but as young people we just got used to it. I was lucky in that I was in a flat with other Clonmel people, so we adjusted together, shall we say. I joined a tennis club.

And that's where I met my husband, because he was playing the cricket.

Yeah. A lot of couples came out of there. Another one of the girls in the flat, she met her husband there also.

Rosaleen: Your first job was with Guinness. They were considered to be a very good employer at the time, I believe.

Una: It was, I think, considered at the time. Yeah, I did feel lucky to get in. You had to have, obviously, a certain level of shorthand and typing to get you over to that stage.

Rosaleen: Did you like working there?

Una: Loved it. Yeah, it was a great place. And we — gosh, can you imagine? We had like white tablecloths and three-course lunch every day, which was part of the job, like free. And they had the swimming pool, they had a medical department, hockey, you know, all the sports. It was great. Yeah, it was great.

Rosaleen: Una married the young man she met at the tennis club. Her new husband was offered a two-year contract in Canada, where opportunities were better than they were in 1980s Ireland. And so they emigrated, initially for two years, first to Halifax and later moving to Toronto, where she has now lived for over 40 years.

Rosaleen: Was leaving Ireland difficult, Una?

Una: Yes, it was really difficult because I was the only girl, and he was in big trouble whisking me off to another country, you know, a seven-hour flight and everything. My father never wanted to fly, so he never came over. But my mom was really good about coming over.

Just when you start to have children, everything — one thing led to another. And when we came, it was almost like an extended adventure and holiday. It was going to be two years.

So, we didn't really think about bringing something that we might really want from Clonmel. But as the years went by, I had my mother send the Clonmel Nationalist, which was the local newspaper, so that I could keep up with what Clonmel people were up to.

And you would scour the paper. It was a weekly, right? You would scour it to see, was there someone you knew? Was there by any chance a picture of you?

Everyone kind of went for The Nationalist. You had to almost fight your corner to read it.

We came in 1980, and things sort of in the early '80s got gradually economically a little worse, and we weren't sure what we would go home to in 1982 or '83 because we had let it lapse where we could go back to my husband's job.

So then it became kind of scary as to what we would go back to at that point. We went home after two years to tell them that we're not staying.

Did not go over well, as you can imagine.

Rosaleen: Lots of Irish people now have grandchildren in Sydney and Perth and Vancouver. Technology and faster travel make things a little easier, but in the 1980s it was tough. Phone calls and the landline were expensive, and letters were still the main way of staying in touch.

Una: I realise now with my own grandchildren that, my goodness, what a thing I did to my parents, because I love to see my grandchildren. They barely saw them.

They had to rely on the post, which they literally fell over trying to get to the front door when my letter would come. [laughter]

I still have all my mom's letters. In fact, I made a book of them. During COVID, I wrote up — I typed up all her letters and made a book, and made a copy for all my brothers, which I have seven.

Rosaleen: It's always hard, isn't it? Today, there are lots of families considering whether to move back from Australia. Was that something you thought about, moving back from Canada?

Una: My husband was doing okay in his job and everything, and it was like, do we go back? Do we not? So finally, I think we kind of left it too late because our children would have been late starting to learn Irish in school and that kind of thing.

So, we just kept staying. It's always like, if you go back, it won't be the same, will it? You know, at the time they called it the "\$2,000 mistake" because you went home and then you decided you didn't really like it and you came back, and so spent a lot of money going home and back.

The nice part was that people were kind of curious to come out and see where we were, and so we got quite a few visitors, which was nice.

Rosaleen: It must have been quite different to your childhood when your own children came along.

Una: I mean, we started out living on the east coast of Canada in Halifax, Nova Scotia, but then we moved into Toronto, which wasn't near the sea.

So, we didn't have things like in Clonmel, where you could go to Tramore or Clonea. Where we are in Toronto, it was part of the culture here that the kids at age four would start learning how to ice skate, and then they would jump from that to playing ice hockey.

Rosaleen: There was a lot to adjust to. And you worked outside the home in Canada, too.

Una: Yes. It was good because I went straight to, again, a secretarial job, and I actually got working for insurance brokers. I stayed there until I had my second baby, and then I stayed home. And then when the boys were — I think the youngest was 13 — I decided I'd try and go back to work.

Rosaleen: How do you find Canadian people?

Una: For the most part, I have always found the Canadians very tolerant and love the Irish. Even just last week, I was introduced to a lady by her sister-in-law, and she said, "Don't you love her accent?" And I'm looking at her thinking, "Forty years later, she thinks I have an accent." But maybe I guess I do. They call it Mid-Atlantic. Yeah.

The Canadians were just in love with the Irish, as far as we know. You know, people coming, aren't there?

Rosaleen: Do you get to visit home much?

Una: My husband's retired now, and it's just like we can do it. So, it's nice to keep that connection of going home.

Rosaleen: Young Irish people are indeed still going to Canada in numbers. I asked Una what she loves most about where she lives and what she would miss most if she had to leave.

Una: Toronto would be like Dublin, having, you know, sports facilities and concert venues and anything you could want, they usually come to Toronto — theatre — and then not too far away there was theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, the George Bernard Shaw Festival. Bradford is not far from Toronto and it has the Shakespeare Festival.

In fact, yes, it's amazing, all the lovely things that are in and around Toronto as well as Toronto.

We actually love the summers. You're guaranteed a good summer, and I think that's what we'd miss most of all, really. Well, besides friends and family, the climate. You're guaranteed a good summer.

And then the winter — yeah, wouldn't miss the winter. Severe.

Rosaleen: Severe winters or not, Una is happy in Toronto, but she does love to visit Ireland regularly to share a laugh with her many friends in Clonmel and, of course, those seven brothers.

[Music]

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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