

The Sunday Tribune: They Have Given Us A Rich Legacy

Tom Kenny writing about his parents Des (R.I.P) and Maureen, who opened their Galway bookshop 48 years ago.

My father, Des Kenny, was born in Galway on 13th October, 1917. The other miracle of that day, he will tell you, occurred in Fatima. His father Tom was a noted journalist and he grew up with the sound of typewriters and with printers ink in his fingernails.

My mother, Maureen Canning, was born in Mohill, Co. Leitrim. Her father died while she was very young and she was reared by her mother, Jane, a remarkable lady, who placed a lot of emphasis on education. My mother won a scholarship to UCG.

My father met her on her first day at college, and that, as he says, was that. They have been a team ever since.

When they finished their degrees, jobs were scarce and prospects generally depressing, but they wanted to stay in Galway, so they decided to open a bookshop. They stocked it by asking for, and borrowing books from their friends and relations and by buying some new books with what little money they had. They opened the door in November 1940, 'with great hope in their hearts.' Several hundred people claim to have been there on that day though my parents remember it as being fairly quiet.

The shop was a small premises in High Street, part of which they used as living quarters. Opening a bookshop then must have seemed like an act of lunacy to many and they found survival difficult. They tried many different ideas like selling secondhand school books, a lending library or, placing stalls in hotels and factories. Eventually they could not live off the bookshop alone and my father went out to work.

Shortly after I was born, they were able to move out to live in Salthill. There my sister Jane was born, followed by Dessy, Gerry, Monica and Conor. Salthill was like a village then, a happy place to grow up in. We all went to school locally.

We were virtually reared on books. One of my earliest memories is that of my mother reading to me from the classics. I remember spending several hours a night in the shop keeping my father company as he waited hopefully for customers - he used to stay open until ten in those days. If anyone became sick in the house they were immediately supplied with a pile of books to pass the time. Thus one's tastes were made Catholic by ploughing through books like Life of St Ignatius Loyola, as well as Treasure Island or Kidnapped. While times were hard, there was never a dull moment.

As the business developed, books found their way into every corner of the house. I printed catalogues on a stencil machine in my bedroom and they were collated by the family from the dining room table. Our living room and hall were converted into an art gallery and a book bindery was built in the backyard. Yet there was never any real pressure put on us regarding books - which is probably why all of the family now work in the business, with the exception of Jane, who is a psychologist and teacher.

Indeed, our parents seem to have pressurised us very little. We followed them by example. They are both very good company, excellent conversationalists, though one is entitled to wonder do they ever talk about anything at all except books. They do in fact have other interests - my mother is a founder member of the Leitrim People's Association in Galway, so that we all found ourselves regularly involved in boxty sales and the like. She is also an active member of the Galway Soroptimist Club.

My father plays a lot of golf. He was always a keen swimmer and often took us swimming. One day when I was about eight years old, I almost drowned in front of him. He did not know what to do. - felt powerless to do anything. Obviously, I survived the ordeal, but it shook my father. It was typical of him that he should immediately find out how to learn water safety. He did exam after exam until he reached the top level and he is now National Chairman of the Irish Water Safety Association. Most rewarding of all for him is his long association with Our Lady's Boys' Club. He is modest about his achievement here, but it is immense and has been for him very fulfilling.

Strangely enough, his major hobby is cooking. While we were growing up, he could not boil an egg. Some years ago he had an attack of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever - he would not get just the flu - and this forced him to slow down a little. So he took up cooking and with great success. He would not be interested in boiling a chicken - he would have to cook something exotic like 'Chicken Fricassee' or 'Chicken en Papillote,' with six vegetables and three desserts.

They both walk a lot and often For several months of the year they start their day with a swim at 6.30 a.m.. They both still work very hard, though they usually enjoy it too much to call it work. They read avidly, mostly books about books, or biography's - rarely fiction nowadays. They used to enjoy classical music, but do not seem to have time for it now, they prefer to listen to some of their 19 grandchildren.

They love humour and enjoy good storytelling. If you were to ask them what they would enjoy most at the end of the day, my father would say, 'a hot bath,' my mother 'just to put my feet up, and a good book.' They love family gatherings and will throw elaborate parties at the drop of a hat. Christmas Day is a highlight, when 3 members of the clan celebrate together.

They never think of holidays, indeed I can never remember them having one as we grew up. So now the family get together and simply hand them tickets for a week in Paris or a fortnight in Rome, or whatever. They love these trips, recently expressing a preference for sunny destinations as opposed to a cultural centre like Florence. The most successful of these holidays was in Rome, where they has a private audience with Pope John Paul II. The talked about swimming and the historical trilogy by Walter Macken, which the Pope had read in Polish.

They both enjoy a drink, though my mother will curb any enthusiasm for same with expressions like 'You have had an elegant sufficiency' or 'Tá sé thar am.' 'A Formidable Woman' is what a well-known writer once called her, an adjective that could also apply to my father.

They have given us values - the importance of family, charity, perseverance, a love of things Irish, especially books. They have taught us that the work of Irish writers and painters is as good as can be found anywhere. They have given us a rich legacy.