

A CENTURY OF SILENCE

Norman Mongan was born in Dublin and studied at the NCAD. An ardent Francophile and European, he moved to Paris in 1962, where - apart from spells in New York and Milan, - he has since resided.

By vocation a writer, photographer, film maker and musician, he was a freelance creative consultant with major advertising agencies throughout Europe, and contributor to publications in France, Ireland, UK and USA.

He published *The History of the Guitar in Jazz* in New York (1984) and Paris (1986) and *The Menapia Quest* in Dublin (1995). His Arts documentary *Oranje & Green* was featured at the Irish Film Institute, Dublin in 2006.

He is now based between Dublin and Paris.

ALSO BY NORMAN MONGAN

The History of the Guitar in Jazz

The Menapia Quest

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“An astonishing achievement ...of sound scholarship, speculative and antiquarian” Dr Alfred Smyth, Chair of Medieval History, University of Kent, Canterbury

“(In) this well researched work...of considerable interest... by taking one Celtic tribe, the author has found an angle from which the history of Celtic Europe, and in particular Celtic Ireland can very usefully be viewed...I salute the diligent research”.

Prof Liam de Paor, Boston College, Boston, MA

“With its painstaking detective work, Mongan’s book coincides with a renewed interest in Celtic culture across Europe: London’s British museum recently opened a permanent display of Iron Age artefacts; while new exhibitions in Belgium explore the country’s Celtic heritage”

Ian Ramsay, *Passport Sabena*, Sept, 1997

“I sincerely recommend this book to anybody interested in our past and people... for the deep amount of research it contains”

Dr Hugh Weir, *Clare Champion*, Feb. 1996

“The author has taken sources, provided them with credibility, building up a work which well could be an example for further studies of the histories of Celtic tribes of Europe. Most commendably of all, for such a difficult subject, is the reliability of this book”

Family History Magazine, Canterbury, UK

Norman Mongan

A CENTURY
ECHOS FROM A MASSACHUSETTS LANDSCAPE
OF SILENCE



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Introduction

I believe that one of the most fundamental human needs is to belong: to a tribe, a clan, a family, a townland, a team, a parish, a county, a nation, a society. Revealingly, the three most consulted subjects on the internet today are money, sex and family history – the basic human instinct to find out where we have come from and where we belong. Its at the very backbone of our sense of self-identity.

Blood is thicker than water and leads adopted children to seek out unknown parents or sperm-donor children to search for their anonymous biological parent and siblings. Emotional reunions with long-lost relatives have been a feature of newspaper and TV reports around the world for years but the advent of the world wide web has greatly facilitated the research for long-lost relatives and ancestors.

This book represents an attempt to examine transatlantic history. Emigration has been a major factor in the history of this Atlantic isle for over two centuries, even as recently the 1980s it was still a feature of Irish life. As Frank McCourt, author of the bestselling *Angela's Ashes* has remarked, 'The study of the Irish in America is still virgin territory. The Irish have only begun to reflect on their past.' Anne Enright, in her *Sunday Times* review (Jan 1, 2006) of Nuala O'Faolain's book *The Story of Chicago May*, eloquently highlighted this trend; 'We are bringing them all back home: it is not just recent emigrants who are returning to Ireland, but the dead, the lost, the long-ago disappeared – their ghosts are being repatriated one by one. This is a necessary task. So deep was the shame of emigration that, for many generations, we never dared to ask what really happened to them, once they were gone'. This book will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of this major aspect of Irish history.

Much has been written about the success stories of the Irish-American Diaspora. This book tells the darker side of that diaspora following the destiny of one family – my own. The Mongans were endemic of the millions of post-Famine Irish families who faced hardship, struggle and tragedy in the New World. Uprooted from familiar ancestral rural homelands, most emigrants had to face the challenges and uncertainties of a fiercely competitive, urban-industrial landscape. They had to fend for themselves, while suffering discrimination, which bordered on racism, and religious intolerance. And yet many preferred to confront these stresses and struggles of life in America rather than resign themselves to a life of

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misery and despair in Ireland. All emigrants in America experienced some degree of estrangement, where they encountered both poverty and prejudice. They suffered homesickness, yet encouraged their relatives and siblings to follow them.

From the early 17th century until the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921–22, as many as 7 million people emigrated from Ireland to North America, an exodus that was to shape the history of both countries. Fleeing from this small island, Irish men and women played an important role in the commercial, cultural and industrial revolution that transformed North America.

Bald statistics starkly reveal the rush to escape Ireland in the mid-19th century. In the fifty years from 1851 to 1901, 3,846,393 people emigrated and, during the years 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854, 1863, 1864, and 1883, over 100,000 left the country annually – with 90 per cent settling in the United States. Today some 44 million Americans claim Irish ancestry.

Research is like gold mining; you have to sift through thousands of tonnes of ore to extract a few grams of the precious metal. The story of my family took shape as my Boston researcher, Ed Hines, gradually brought to light the factual evidence of my family's long-hidden destiny in America which revealed the disintegration of a family unit on both sides of the Atlantic as tragedy struck. I never imagined the quest for my ancestors would come to dominate my existence to such a large extent and that its innate poignancy would make it such a challenging and emotional experience. However, in spite of its sad nature, this journey has enabled me to reinstate my father's ancestors to their rightful place in the overall clan/family story. I trust it will also be an iconic story of countless Irish families in America and across the worldwide Irish Diaspora.

I have traced the history of my family based on the available, sometimes fragmentary, documentary evidence extracted from the archives both in Ireland and America. The resulting story looks at the process of emigration: how emigrants decided to leave, the ocean voyage itself and how they financed the voyage, and how these emigrants faced their involuntary exile. How they had to develop an ability to adapt to their new surroundings, to adjust and prosper abroad, and the consequent tensions and stresses of that adjustment. How they became able to leave the past behind them and embrace their future in the New World while ensuring that they never lost sight of their Irish identity.

I had some fortuitous encounters on my journey. My late mother Agnes (Staveley) Mongan visited America in 1978. At the time, I suggested that she contact her (unrelated) namesake, the eminent Fogg Art Museum curator at Harvard University, when she was in Boston. Although they never met, they did speak by phone. My mother's namesake mentioned a friend and fellow Harvard graduate, retired US Air Force Colonel Edgar 'Pat' Mongan, an also unrelated, Sacramento-based attorney who had developed a passionate interest in what he called 'Mongan-hunting'.

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I developed an engrossing correspondence with Col Pat over the following years and later flew out to California where we spent several stimulating days exchanging ideas and took a road trip to explore San Francisco. Col Pat Mongan sadly passed away in 1994, leaving me to continue this quest on my own, regretting that I no longer had him as a sounding board to bounce ideas off.

When I made my initial trip to Boston in 1980, I had the pleasure of being invited to lunch by my mother's namesake, Agnes Mongan (1905–96), and her distinguished physicist brother, Charles, at her rooms in Harvard. She was the daughter of Dr Charles Mongan, a Somerville physician whose ancestors came from Roundstone, County Galway. At seventy-five years old, Agnes was a very gracious host to myself and my researcher Ed Hines. The wide-ranging conversation naturally turned to Irish roots, and my burgeoning quest for the long-lost American branch of the family. Erudite, witty and charming, with expressive round eyes and doll-like features, Agnes encouraged me to continue my research, and locate the missing family members in the archives. It was a memorable and, for me, historic meeting, and a memory to be cherished.¹

During his official visit to Ireland in 1963 with First Lady Jackie, President Kennedy had stressed how much the Irish had contributed to America. He pointed out that his own grandfather had left New Ross, County Wexford, after the Famine, and that his grandson had been elected President of the United States. Kennedy was received by the Irish President Eamon De Valera at Áras an Uachtaráin in the Phoenix Park. In his speech to the Dáil on 28 June 1963, President Kennedy underlined how 'our two nations, divided by distance, have been united by history'.

No people ever believed more deeply in the cause of freedom than the people of the United States. And no country contributed more to the building of my own country than your sons and daughters. They came to our shores in a mixture of hope and agony, and I would not underrate the difficulties of their course of action once they arrived in the United States. They left behind hearts, fields and nation yearning to be free. It is no wonder that James Joyce described the Atlantic as a bitter bowl of tears. And the poet W.B. Yeats wrote: 'They are going, going, going, and we cannot bid them to stay.'

Fitting the pieces of my quest together has been both a challenge and a fulfilment. It has been a titanic, emotional roller-coaster, a demanding struggle with history, and with myself, as I strove to assemble the disparate pieces of the vast mosaic together. I have found the writing down of my family tragedy to be a form of catharsis, a healing act, that helped to redeem what was a catastrophe and turn it into a positive epiphany. It has removed the family's 'skeleton' from the cupboard and laid it to rest. It has lifted a baleful historic pall from our past.

I trust that this story may be an inspirational example of what can be unearthed by persistent research, and encourage others to seek out their missing

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ancestral links. I found it ironic, almost perverse, that, as an Irishman, I was led to search for my long-lost family in America. It is usually the exact opposite, with Americans coming to Ireland to seek out their ancestral heritage.

It also highlighted the risks of indepth genealogical research – you may not always like what the factual evidence reveals, as shown by the popular TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* This quest obliged me to put many other projects on hold, so its with a sense of relief that I feel I can now let go of the past and move on. For any errors or ommissions that may have slipped into the text, I beg the reader's indulgence.

Norman Mongan
Dublin, 2008