

# Cumann na Daoine Women's Group



## Legacy Project The First Chapter

The Legacy Project began with a series of interviews conducted by local historian Michael Twomey with some members of the Cumann na Daoine Women's Group in 2016. The women answered questions about their lives and about the world they grew up in. They also reflected on how much life has changed, particularly for women, but also for families and children. The Project was coming back to life in 2020 until Covid19 slowed us down. Until we can return to the Legacy Project, here is a first edition of reminiscences to keep us going. Myself and CnD Women's Group Chair Nikki Bray are looking forward to hearing more stories from members old and new when we can meet, and chat, again. Some members are sadly no longer with us. With fond memories, we wish that Alice, Nellie and Tilly may rest in peace, and their stories live on through this project.

*Hayley Fox-Roberts*

## Childhood Memories



**Alice:** I was reared in Sarsfield Terrace. We used to make the houses out of leaves. Everyone one of you would be up with brushes by Raphael's wall, of course there were no cars, might only be the doctor had a car. We used to go down to Watson's Stained Glass and they'd give you a bag of broken glass, we'd be delighted because of all the colours for the house. We'd go all the way back up then, all excited. A great friend of my Mam's was working at Torpey's, there was a bakery up there, she'd have a bag of cakes put away for us. She'd tell Mrs. Torpey they were all broken. Mrs. Torpey was wicked mean. Teresa would say, "They're all broken so we have to give them to the children". So we went back to our house of leaves with a bag of cakes and a bag of glass and we'd sit down there with our friends. When we were working I remember coming in from the factory and we'd be made listen to Radio Luxembourg, it would be put on and next thing my father would go telling tales about the sea and we used be furious. Instead of writing it down, we'd be looking at each other going will he ever shut up. And now I'd love to have all that. He was torpedoed in the First World War and no one could afford to go up to Dublin to see him.

**Nellie:** We grew up in Raheen Road and our playground was Green's Quay, Dunne's Park. We swam in the slob, we didn't go to the beach. On the quay we crabbed fish. Down where the shipping is now, was the town dump, they used to call it the Piles. Long ago we were left roam. We were never sick. We were free to walk to school and walk home again and we didn't have proper garb, I can tell you, or shoes or wellies or anything at the time. We'd sit in school soaking wet, we had no other choice and there was nine of us. A crowd of us would go to the Spá Hill, we'd play up there, we'd have bits of broken crockery from down the piles and we'd make a house. We'd go down the slob with cardboard and roll down the bank; the roly-poly as we called it. One evening it was turning dusk and we were running around and someone said, 'Anyone see Pa, did anyone see Pa?' Pa and some other fella had tied two bins together, gone into the water and way out. I don't know who got them in in the end.

People were a lot closer. People helped each other, they had to. They did everything themselves, made bread, cakes, cooked, knitted, sewed. They wasted nothing. If one was without, the other helped.

**Cilla:** My father had an abattoir. We lived past St. Finbarr's morgue, surrounded by fields. He had a horse and cart and went around to all the butchers. He was only 56 when he died. My Grandmother was alive at the time and she used to make the country butter. I remember the two big slabs in the kitchen. If you didn't eat it you'd get a clatter. She'd have a big block of bread and a load of butter on top, it was salty, it was desperate and you'd get mangled then if you didn't eat it. She was sick one time in bed. She had long grey hair and she said, 'Mary will you comb my hair'. I was after making a lovely black mohair jumper. She said, 'I'd love that', so I gave it to her. Next thing she was after cutting the whole thing up, put buttons in it and turned it into a cardigan. I never got me jumper back out of her.

**Margaret:** All belonging to me were either sailors or fishing folk. My whole world revolved around the quay. Everything in my life hinged on the fishing. February 1<sup>st</sup> was the big day and you hoped to get a day off school because of the blessing of the boats. St. Brigid's Day was extremely significant. The season ran until they rounded up on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July. My father was a boat builder and my grandparents had a salmon exporting business. It was so hard for people, especially coming up to Christmas week. There were four men to a boat. The men would hope to get what was called a 'bounty'. My father found it really difficult to gather up that money. I remember it was 7 pound a bounty. The idea was the fishermen could get themselves a set of oilskins and stuff like that. They would then pledge to fish with the man who owned the boat for the season. The Nunnies, the Hickeys, the Murphys, the Roches in the Terrace, they were like aunts and uncles to us. When the season was over most of them had to go away, my friend's fathers often had to go to England. There was terrible poverty but it was a pattern of life and you had to get on with it. The fishermen had unquestioning faith, it was deep with them. Nobody worked Sundays but one Sunday the quay was full to the brim of sprats and the fishermen had to ask Canon Sheehan if they could fish and he said 'certainly'. There was a bit of brouhaha one Procession Sunday when the fishermen were invited by the Canon to carry the canopy. Those who carried the canopy always wore white gloves. The Canon said there was absolutely no need for the fishermen to wear white gloves, their hands were spotless. It caused terrible dissention. The Canon could always see the big picture.

**Mary:** We lived three miles outside Maynooth. I was 9 when my mother died. I was reared with my two brothers and father. We lived in a cottage, three houses together. Just down the road there were two houses, my uncles lived there. Everybody was in everybody's house. We had no water so my father dug a well. There was a pump up at the cross alright, but he decided to dig his own well. People would call for the water, we had a cow and my uncles would come up for two bottles of milk. I remember the council men working on the road, lighting fires on the side of the road and making tea. Our house was a music house, there'd be cards in another house. We had a radio and that time there was two batteries, a wet battery and a dry battery and my father would put away the wet battery because that had to be charged, we used to bring it down town to have it charged, he'd have that put away, we weren't allowed put on the radio. When he'd come in from work he'd put it on for the six o'clock news and turn it off again. I had a neighbour up the road who was mad for listening to Radio Luxembourg, Pete Murray and I used to go up to her to hear the songs. The rosary was said on Saturday night, the men polished the shoes. There was everyday clothes and Sunday clothes, that was it, no such thing as fashion.

**Gretta:** I grew up on a farm and I will always remember my mother telling me when I was going to make my first Holy Communion. That was my most vivid memory. My father couldn't bring me, he always had to work so hard in the fields. My sister was going to walk me to the church, a three-mile walk. A neighbour brought me. In those days your mother would bring you around to the shops that she knew and dealt with and they would give you money. Growing up on the farm we didn't really know what was going on in town. When we came in from school my mother would tell me go to the fields and dig the potatoes, dig the carrots, dig the vegetables for the dinner, go to the well for water, feed the calves, the pigs and the hens. The winter was a quiet time for my mother. She would sit and try to knit for all of us. I was the sixth born and there was five more after me. I have a vivid memory of my mother not being around us much because she was so busy. She helped my father in the field, always. First thing in the morning she'd have the porridge ready for us and we had to fend for ourselves after that. She did everything she possibly could for us.

The only entertainment we had was playing in cardboard boxes or my sister pulling me up and down the kitchen floor. I always knew what was in my Christmas stocking because it was always round and it was always an orange. There were no toys, just paper whistles and balloons. We played picky and marbles. I did a lot of heavy work, I was the strong one but I had a wonderful time on the farm.

My father had some relations in Chicago and they would send them (parcels) over, it was like Christmas. It was all clothes and before they came I never remember getting new clothes. Clothes that were handed down were adjusted and when they got too small they were added to. I remember I couldn't get my arms into a coat and I told my mother it was squeezed under my arms. She took it to the dressmaker and told me it would fit perfectly...and it did.

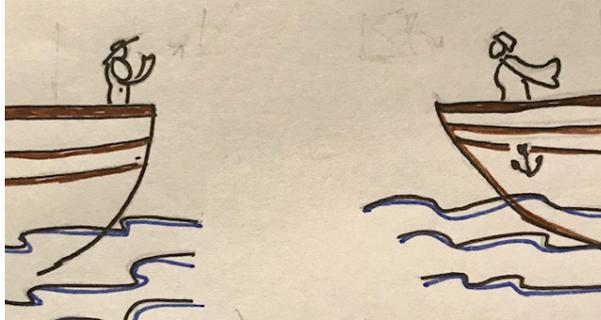
We left for school at twenty past 8 and we'd walk across the fields. We'd get there at quarter to 10. We had to change from our boots into shoes and sometimes we'd arrive soaking wet and at the end of school putting the wet coat back on and walking home again. Our first teacher was too tough on us and we were so young. The Master was strict but there was no punishment. I went to secondary school but I didn't stay.

**Margaret K:** The highlight of our youth was the movies. We knew every single movie star. We'd sell our soul for the price of the pictures, which was fourpence, a penny for a slab and a penny for a bar. We were told not to go by the nuns but we went even if the sun was splitting the stones. Electricity came when I was about 11 or 12 and my father got a radio. People used to call to house and say, 'Can we have a look at the radio please'. And of course we'd pray for the Yankee parcels.

I begged my mother not to put the clips on my shoes to save them from wearing out. You could be heard from here to Gortroe walking along the street. Everything was patched up. A coat would be turned inside out and that was it...new coat!

To do even your Primary exam was a big deal. When the factories came to Youghal in the 50s it was like a bonanza and loads of people left school.

## What would you have done if you had time over again?



**Ethna:** I would have been a nurse. I went to London, to the North Middlesex hospital and did a year and passed but then my brother died. I had to come home. A friend's father gave me the fare to come home for the funeral. That's how it was back then. If your family needed you then you gave up your career.

I always had the ambition to do a degree but never had the money. I was interested in psychology but I may not have been able for it.

**Theresa:** I would have travelled the world. I would have gone to every country I possibly could have. We didn't get the opportunity. Once you finished primary school you had to go out and work. There was so many of us at home that you had to work.

**Nellie:** I never dreamed of leaving Youghal. I did travel a bit but I had no real desire to be going anywhere really. Although I had the mind one time to go to Australia but my husband wouldn't budge. We could have went for 10 pound a head.

**Alice:** It was only when I got older that I travelled. When we were young we never looked beyond Youghal. I would have stayed on in school if I could have. We always had enough but money would still be short. We had to give up school. Now, I love doing courses.

## What's one thing you always wanted but still don't have?

**Theresa:** You get more content as you get older. You can do things like travel and you don't have to answer to anyone. We had privacy when we were young. We used to walk out to Redbarn for the dance and my mother would say 'here's the money for the bus' but we walked out the beach, a big gang of us, boys and girls, and when the dance was over they would never leave you on your own coming back. Nobody knew what you were up to.

**Gretta:** A warm climate, living in the sun.

**Cilla:** I would have loved to have learned how to drive. I got the chance, I was driving but I crashed and never again would I sit behind the wheel. That was forty years ago and we didn't have the price of another one.

**Nellie:** There are some things in life you can never have and you have to accept the way things are. I'm quite happy with my life. I worry about today's children. I worry that they will never have the freedom that we had. You can't leave them outside the house unless they are chaperoned.

## Is life better for women today?

**Mary:** All they have to do now is press a button and everything is done for them. I had to go down to the well and drag water up. On a Sunday evening I'd be drawing the water. On a Monday I'd have the big pot over the range and I'd be boiling and washing and squeezing them and putting them out on the line. I had nine children and a line the length of the garden. The nappies had to be boiled and you couldn't put them on the line if they weren't white because somebody would be passing and say 'there's a dirty mother inside there'. It was the thing of the day and it was everyday, that's what I was there for, to look after the children. I even went out on the Blackwater fishing, salmon fishing with my husband.

**Gretta:** I agree with Mary. Life back then was just work and more work. We all worked hard, my mother and us. We were given hard work that we weren't even able for. The fact that I had to drop out of school to help my mother, even though she didn't say it to me directly, I knew that's what she wanted and I did that for her. Later on, when I was married, for twenty years, I decided to educate myself and I went to UCC and did a diploma there. It was something I wanted to do for me because I missed out on so much. Definitely life now for mothers is much easier.

**Alice:** I went out to the Mill Road because there was no water in the house, no sewerage in the house so I used to be out at the pump at the side of the road. People would be passing by and I'd be there rinsing all the clothes and had to bring them back then through the house and onto the line. You just did it and when I tell the lads about it now they'd be laughing. 'Weren't you an awful fool', they'd say. I mean we had eight children. No way would there be eight children in a house now. I feel for some of the young women today. We didn't know what a mortgage was, we were never told what it was to buy a house. I feel for them because they're always in a hurry. I must go here, I must go there and do this and that. They have beautiful houses with everything in them but they're working very hard for it.

## Differences between family life then and now



**Theresa:** I don't think parents spend enough time going for walks with their children. They won't say to them 'turn off the phone, the iPad, the Xbox, we're going for a walk'. They will regret that later on. This generation will regret that they didn't spend more time bonding with their children. They don't interact enough with each other.

Kids don't go out and play. In the summer we'd get up in the morning, do what we had to in the house, go down the Mall strand, and we'd be down there the whole day, just playing all day and nothing to bother us.

A lot of children left school and they couldn't read or write.

I was working in a shop in town and I got pregnant and the owner said to me "I can't have you working here while you're pregnant, you'll have to go". As far as she was concerned it was unsightly.

**Nellie:** They can't enjoy what they have because there is no such thing today as 'Rome wasn't built in a day'. They want everything yesterday. If a child comes home from school and says another child has such a thing they have to have the same thing.

Young people today are so liberated but I think school is a competition, it's not like we knew it. I've seen with my own grandchildren, they all did well but it doesn't leave them with much time for leisure. There's an awful lot of pressure. You love to see them all doing well in school but it's too competitive and if they don't achieve it's all about where are they going to go? There's a lot of children who can't achieve what they want to achieve. You can't teach them at home, even counting the way we learned it because you'll be told 'stop' that's not how it's done anymore.

Fathers are more hands on with children today, they share a lot better. They wouldn't roll a pram or change a nappy one time, we had to boil the cloth nappies. Men don't have that macho attitude anymore about not stooping down to do things, they chip in. It makes a big difference to the marriage

**Maggie:** Growing up we were restricted and you didn't get the opportunities where as kids today have endless opportunities - but are they missing out on fundamental things? We

were held back, you didn't travel very far and you stayed in your own locality. People married people in their area. Are the kids missing out? Maybe, they have all the advantages.

My grandchildren want to be paid before they do anything. My grandson wouldn't cut the grass for free, he'd expect something. What made me laugh a few years ago at Christmas was my two granddaughters, they were about twelve years of age, it was coming up to Christmas and one said to me that she wanted something for Christmas and I said, 'Well you might not get it.' She said, 'You're my Nanny, you have to get it for me.' It was like I had no choice, I was obliged, no question.

Childminders cost a fortune but parents have to pay. Before, you could get grandma to look after them and that's starting to happen again now because parents can't afford it. When we had babies you gave up work straight away but with maternity leave you can go back to work and that's a big difference for women.

**Cilla:** Children aren't given any jobs to do. They're not asked to do anything. My brother and myself we always had jobs to do. My own children had their own jobs and I'd give them a couple of bob at the end of the week. And if more children did it, it would be better for them.

In my house anyway, the father would give a roar at the children, to chastise them, standing at the end of the stairs he'd say. 'Don't ye take me up that stairs!' Shur, he wouldn't go up the stairs in a fit. And children will hang on to you today if you are talking with someone. If we did that we'd be told 'walk on'.

Some of the children going to school now, unfortunately, they can't pick up what they're being taught but there is help there, where as when we went to school it was your own look out. If you didn't know your tables you'd get a clatter. There was no remedial teachers. If say, JohnJo, was the joker in the class, he was just left behind. Now, if a teacher has their hands full with someone messing they might call in the parents and if the teacher said he was spitting or something like that the parents will say 'He wasn't, you must have imagined it'!

Once upon a time you'd get a nudge, 'Wake up, the child is crying.'

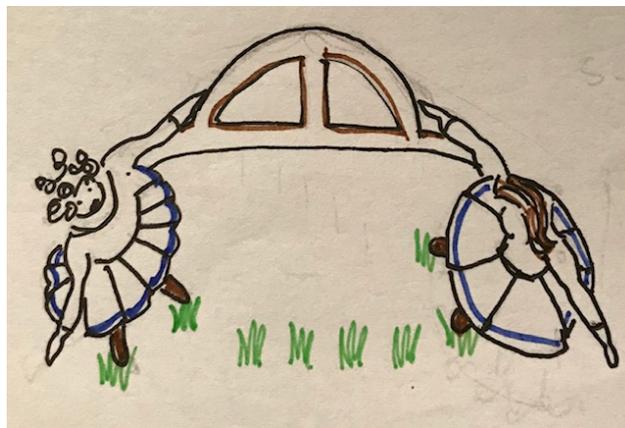
When I was pregnant my father said to me, 'Are you having a baby?' 'I am,' I said. Seven 'o clock Sunday morning I hear a bang on my bedroom door. 'What is it, Dad?' I said. 'Mass,' he said. 'And dress yourself properly.' In other words, cover yourself up. And before you had your baby you'd be blessed and after your baby you'd be churched. In the Bishop's eyes and the Cardinal's eyes it was a sin, even though it was the most wonderful thing. You couldn't even go out and get the shopping even if you weren't churched.

**Alice:** I think the kids are more demanding. We used to come in from school, have something to eat, sit around the table, do the homework and go off and play in the open space and you could stay out and play. The kids now have to be watched all the time. Mothers can't get an hour's break.

You couldn't keep your job if you got married either. I was working in Blackwater Cottons and got married in 1956 and I didn't go back. You missed your friends you worked with.

**Ethna:** If someone had an abortion they had to go to the Bishop to be forgiven and it had to be midweek.

## Things you've learned in the course of your life



**Theresa:** Discipline and consequences. If you did something wrong there were consequences. My elder brother Liam, God rest him, went into a shop and stole a lollipop. My father went in there to get cigarettes after getting off the train from the barracks and he was told that Liam had stolen a lollipop. My father came home and he marched Liam straight down to the shop, made him apologise and told he had to work off the value of the lollipop, either cleaning the shop or washing the windows and he said if you do something wrong these are the consequences.

**Cilla:** When I started off first, when I got married things were hard but you waited until you could afford to get the things you wanted. The way it is now if somebody sees someone across the road they'll say why can't we go on holidays even if those people across the road had to work morning, noon and night to get their holiday.

## A person who influenced you?



**Ethna:** My mother. After my father died I saw her work so hard to keep, as she would say, the bailiff from the door. She lost her hair after her first child and she had to wear a wig and it was heavy, the sweat used to pour out of her head and face, but she kept going.

**Nellie:** I would say my mother, too. She was an outstanding woman and an outstanding mother. She had nine of us and did everything she could possibly do for us. One of my aunts was a clean freak, she polished where you stood. If you brushed your teeth, she'd polish the taps. But my mother was a mother and father to us all.

**Theresa:** My grandmother. She lived with us and there was a lot of children in the house. She was always there for us. She'd take us to the pictures on Sunday afternoon. My father would line us up and we'd get sixpence, fourpence to get in and a tuppence to spend, slabs of toffee. She take us to give my mother and father a break. She'd take us down the Mall. She was a tall woman with a shawl and her hair in a bun. She'd walk us along the quay, talking to the fishermen. We were like a row of ducks behind her. She scrubbed us all and minded us all. She was a great inspiration to me.

## Songs and films you remember.



**Margaret:** I remember when Uncle Michael brought a radio home to Cork Hill and the house was full of men looking at this amazing PYE radio. We thought we'd never get a chance to see it. Dick Haymes used to sing 'Let The Rest of the World Go By'. I'd say to my husband Hughie now, he's so laid back, that if he goes before me I'm going to put that right on top of his grave stone – Let The Rest of the World Go By. Mario Lanza was a big one, too. There would be queues up Wyma Lane to see him at the pictures.

'Gone With The Wind' had everything. We went down to Horgan's to see it, it hadn't been in Youghal for years. Sissy Fitz was with us down the front and when Rhett Butler picked up Scarlet 'O Hara and carried up these magnificent stairs there was dead silence and next thing all you could hear was Sissy shouting out, 'Ha haya lad ya'. The whole cinema burst out laughing in hysterics. Going up the road later she said. 'them old sheevers today don't know how to make love to a woman, not like Rhett!'

**Cilla:** Well I remember when you went to the dance the nuns would be there with a ruler to make sure there was a foot between the couples, I mean what harm could you do?

'When I Fall In Love', Nat King Cole. Even when he went into old age he had a beautiful voice. Him now and old blue eyes, Frank Sinatra. Of course when we saw Elvis in the cinema we got out of our seats and we'd jive in the aisles.

**Alice:** 'Sweet Sixteen'. When it would come on Sonny would start waltzing around the kitchen, and our kitchen was small, but every time it came on he'd be off. When it comes on now there'd be tears in my eyes. It's a song that sticks in my memory all the time.

**Nellie:** People used always whistle, it was like a pastime, you wouldn't hear people whistle like that anymore. I remember my brother lived in Cornwall, he was with Mike O'Brien walking down the pier one night and they heard whistling. They stopped dead and my brother said, 'well if that isn't a Yellop I don't know what to say', and it was, it was Joe Yellop and they recognised the whistle.