

A portrait of an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a blue plaid suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark red tie. He is sitting in a dark wooden chair with a decorative backrest. The background features a patterned wallpaper with floral motifs. The man is smiling slightly and has his hands clasped in front of him.

SEAN O'CONNELL

REMINISCING
COLLECTION OF ESSAYS



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COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

Photograph of Sean O'Connell as a young Radio Officer in July, 1954.

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Cover image:
Sean O'Connell, photograph by his daughter, Catherine, at Dromoland Castle.

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FOREWORD

Sean O'Connell enters his tenth decade with a myriad of adventures behind him. 'Reminiscing' is now a container for these vivid experiences. Sean's many re-inventions, his encounters with the ordinary of the everyday and the bizarre of the unexpected, are captured with wit, grace and charm.

Sean's early life tells about his upbringing by two artistic parents. His mother had an abiding interest in organising local theatrical events while his father was a Cabinet Maker. As a young man, Sean trained to be a Radio Officer in Atlantic College, Dublin and found employment with the shipping line Marconi. His travels took him as far as the Caribbean.

There are many experiences to savour but the one I find the most moving concerns the year 1975 when Eithne, Sean's sister-in-law, together with her husband Desmond, were killed in a car crash in Ireland. Sean and his wife Joan took in their three children and suddenly, their own family of two daughters Catherine and Una swelled to five to include the addition of twin girls Paula and Patricia and their brother Ciarán. Sean and Joan (alas now deceased) weathered the storms which followed, in particular when Ciarán, a budding gymnast and swimmer, lost a leg.

'Reminiscing' offers empathy to those who have felt the ache of heart-break or the slings and arrows of cruel fate. At the end of the day, consolation comes when a generous heart reveals the beauty of truth. 'Reminiscing' is a series of tableau vivant, coloured by happiness or tinged with sorrow. It ends in true Joycean 'Dubliners' style; at Christmas, with a family meal. Such a gathering proves the perfect landscape to pause and reflect, to look to the future while remembering the past. In short, what good memoir strives to achieve.

Eileen Casey
June, 2024

From the Family album.



DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my offspring and nieces who badgered me to tell them of incidents in my life and that of my family. To do this as professionally as possible I enrolled on a online writing course. I was lucky to have Eileen Casey, poet and writer, as my tutor. I cannot thank Eileen enough for the help she gave me and her encouragement, that made me want to write.

I thank Mark Ulyseas of *Live Encounters*, for agreeing to edit and publish my work. And I thank you for taking the time to read this dedication and maybe go on to read my story.

Sean O'Connell
Bunratty
Co Clare
Ireland

The engagement of Sean and Joan.



The wedding of Sean and Joan, 22nd of July 1958.

PREFACE

Following the badgering of my daughters and nieces I decided to write my memoir. This book started as a memoir but has turned out to be semi-autobiographical. I narrate the various incidents in my life from the 1940s and in the life of my family from my marriage in 1958 up today. I tell of the tragic incident in 1975 that changed our family life for ever.

My biggest regret is that my darling wife Joan is not here to help me and to read this completed work. Joan was part of my life for sixty-four years. We were more than husband and wife, we were pals.

Sean O'Connell
June, 2024

A LIFE ON THE OCEANS' WAVES

I was born in Lismore, County Waterford, on the 26th of February 1933 to Tim and Kate O'Connell. My father was a cabinet maker and joiner, and my mother run a guest house. In her spare time, she organised variety shows locally for church charities. I was educated at the local Christian Brothers school where I did my Leaving Certificate.

Most Sunday afternoons, the one and only cinema in Lismore, my hometown, would show cowboy films. After the show a gang of boys, me included, would 'gallop' home on our 'cowboy horses'. I think we all wanted to be cowboys when we grew up. But then we never saw a cowboy ride up our main street and leave his horse outside one of the local saloons. So how were we to become cowboys?

I knew what a Cabinet Maker did, I never did understand the difference between Cabinet Maker and what a Joiner did. My father was a perfectionist and did not encourage visitors to his workshop when he was working. He never asked me or any of my brothers to join him as a cabinet maker. He later told me that he did not want to fall out with us by working with us as he was worried that we would not reach the standard on which he insisted. So, Cabinet Making was out as a career. If I had known more about being a Joiner maybe I would have tried that.

My favourite uncle was an engine driver. Now, there was a job that I fancied. Then in about 1940, my eldest brother, who had a commission in the Irish Army was visiting the local army barracks and called to see my mother. I was impressed by his uniform, riding type britches, long high boots and a Sam Browne belt with pips on his shoulders. I decided there and then that I would apply for a cadetship in the army.

When I had past my Leaving Cert, I applied to the Army and was called for an interview. My friends and I had decided that we would speak only Irish between ourselves. I was convinced that my Irish fluency was good enough to apply to join the Irish speaking regiment. When interviewed for that regiment I realised that I was not up to the standard that was expected. I was not selected for a cadetship.

I think that it was the thought of wearing a uniform that persuaded me to encourage my parents to allow me to enrol in Atlantic College in Dublin to study to be a sea going Radio Officer. While training in Dublin I met my future wife, Joan Ellis. When I passed my exams and obtained my certificates, I was employed by Marconi Marine and assigned to my first ship, the RMS Nova Scotia as Third Radio Officer. I was so proud in my uniform with one gold band on the cuffs of my jacket.

I was earning money for the first time, £24 a month, a good wage for that time, with full board on the ship. I had my own cabin and a steward. I felt like a king. The ship's homeport was Liverpool, and she would sail between Liverpool, St. John's Newfoundland, Halifax, and Boston, with a round voyage of one month. As well as being a Royal Mail ship we carried passengers. I remember sailing from Liverpool for the first time. As we left the harbour, I stood on the deck watching the lights in the houses on the shore. I wondered how they were going to spend their evening, and at the same time apprehensive about what my first night at sea would be like.

The radio office was manned twenty-four hours a day when at sea. My watch was from 8 am to 12 noon. We did four hours on and eight hours off. The North Atlantic can be very rough. On about my second day at sea we ran into a storm. The only way I could remain seated at my desk was to trap one foot in a lower drawer and my left arm into a top drawer. This left my right arm free to operate the Morse key.

I started to develop a bad headache and my stomach began to churn. I just wanted to get on dry land. The radio office was next to the bridge and the captain came in to see how I was faring.

He then told me that he was seasick for the first day every time he left Liverpool. I wondered if I had chosen the correct career. When later that day, as the storm abated, I started to feel a lot better and for all my time at sea I never felt ill again. I often felt sorry for that captain.

The ship's Chief Radio Officer was a Liverpool man, a very kind and understanding gentleman. The Second Radio Officer was Mr Fleming from Cork city. When at sea, one day slips into another. Before going on my 8 am watch I would enjoy what is known as 'a full English breakfast'. Sometimes, as I was about to attack a sausage, the dining room steward would come to me and say, "*Compliments of Mr. Fleming, today is Friday*". Mr Fleming would sit at the senior Officers table with a big smile on his face and boiled eggs in front of him.

I did about four voyages with that ship and was then assigned to the Empress of Scotland, one of the last three funnelled ships still sailing. I did three cruises in the Caribbean Sea before being promoted as Chief Radio Officer to a cargo/passenger ship the SS Cottrell. Her home port was London, sailing down the West Coast of Africa to Lagos and up the Niger River to Port Harcourt. That voyage took about three months. I now had two gold rings on my cuffs.

The Cottrell was Liberty Vessel built in 1944. I was very happy aboard this ship. I joined her in Tilbury a few days before we sailed for Africa. My cabin was next to the captain's quarters, and we shared the same steward, a Nigerian called Sunday. It was a cargo/passenger ship with accommodation for twelve passengers.

We would call at several ports along the West Coast of Africa, stopping first at Dakar in Senegal where those that were sailing down the coast for the first time would be injected against the various illnesses prevalent on the West Coast.

At each port we would deliver and collect cargo. Merchants would also come on board as deck passengers, with goods to be sold at various ports. The deck passengers lived on the deck and would bring their own food. The passengers to join the ship in London were either missionaries or colonial servants returning from leave. The cargo order we picked up on the coast for the UK was timber in the form of logs and palm oil.

The most exciting part of the voyage was sailing up the Niger river. We called at several areas on our way to Port Harcourt. The Niger had several difficult bends and to sail round them it would be necessary at times to partially run the ship aground and then reverse slowly. Luckily the banks were very muddy and the ship suffered no damage.

Port Harcourt was a busy port and at times we would have to wait in the river for a berth to become free. On the deck outside my cabin was a motor for one of the cranes. On one voyage we waited for about ten days. Some of the officers decided that they would have an awayday. They came into my cabin pretending that it was a railway carriage and started the motor outside the cabin to make the sound of a train. After a short 'trip' they went out on deck with their picnic and cans of beer. They just sat around chatting and telling yarns and having a laugh. After some time, they restarted the motor, came back into my cabin for the train journey home. They were just killing the monotony of sitting in the river.

One Sunday the First Officer decided that we should have a hymn service for the crew and passengers. We said some prayers and sang hymns, but when we came to the line *'for those in peril on the sea'* in the hymn *'Eternal Father Strong to Save'* we were hit by a massive wave that came from what was a perfectly calm sea. I wondered if it was the Lord letting us know that he heard our prayer service but was not pleased with our poor singing.

During my shore leave on what was to be my last voyage on the Cottrell, Joan gave an ultimatum "It's the sea or me". We agreed that I would do one more trip, but another Radio Officer was assigned to the Cottrell. I was assigned to the 'SS Mendi Palm', which was also doing the same run down the West Coast but not going up the Niger. I was not as happy on her as I had been on the Cottrell, and in a way, I was glad to be coming ashore.

MARRIAGE

In time of test, family is best.

- Burmese proverb

When I came ashore, I joined Independent Television Authority as a transmission engineer. I was stationed first in England then Scotland and finally, when Ulster television opened, I was transferred to Belfast.

Joan and I married on the 22nd of July 1958.

In 1961, while in Belfast, we adopted Catherine when she was three months old. Three years later Joan gave birth to our daughter, Una.

In 1966 I was appointed a Lecturer in Telecommunications at City College for Further Education in London. We moved from Belfast to Brentwood in Essex. In Brentwood we bought a large house, larger than we actually needed. We converted a loft into an on-suite bedroom for Joan and me. Later we would appreciate the large house and the conversion we had made. We were a happy contented family. Catherine was learning to play the piano and violin, and Una was showing talent as a singer and actor.

Wednesday 23rd July, 1975. This was the day on which our family changed forever.

Joan had a sister, Eithne in Ireland. Eithne had five children and she was to have a serious brain operation during the summer of 1975. We had agreed with her that we would take three of her children to Brentwood while she had the operation and recuperated. On the morning of 23rd July, Joan and I collected the three children, twin girls Paula and Patricia and a boy Ciarán, from Heathrow airport. The girls were aged eight years and Ciarán was aged ten.

Our own children were members of a youth drama group. The group had arranged to perform two plays that evening in the local church hall. As parents we were involved with makeup and costumes.

Before we went to the church hall, Joan rang Maureen, her other sister, in Manchester, to tell her that the children had arrived safely. We had just got home when the phone rang. It was Maureen's husband Ron, we thought that it was Maureen who wanted to speak with the three children. But no, Ron told us that there had been a serious car accident in Ireland and that Eithne and her husband Desmond were both dead and that their other two children, who were in the car were critically injured and in hospital. We were in shock. How were we to tell them that their parents were dead, and their brothers seriously injured?

Joan decided to speak to Catherine and Una, and I would try to explain what had happened to Eithne's children. When I spoke to them, they neither cried nor asked questions. They just stood and looked at each other trying to understand what had happened. I put my arms around all three and we hugged for a long time.

Desmond's family at that time were unable to be involved with the future care of the children. The advice we received was not to allow the three children in our care, to return to Ireland. Had they done so, there was a possibility that they would be put into care. After about ten months, the Irish courts agreed that we could become, what they called 'First Friends' of the children and that we would care for them. Maureen and Ron were given the care of the two brothers, Desmond and Brian, who were injured in the car accident, when they were discharged from hospital in Dublin.

We agreed that Eithne's children should get together as often as possible. To this end we all got together at Christmas and Easter and as both families were caravaners, we caravanned together for two weeks in the summer.

Catherine continued with her musical education and preparing for her 'O' levels and Una started her Secondary Education. The twins and Ciarán were enrolled in the local primary school. Joan and I would spend the next year checking on all the children to make sure that the situation we were in were not affecting them. It was difficult to read the minds of young children. Were they putting on an act or had they really understood what was happening?

As well as coping with the emotional side of things there were very practical things to do. We needed a larger car to accommodate our extended family. We also had to plan ways in which to encourage the twins and Ciarán to settle into our family, such as giving each child a small domestic responsibility. We did notice that with enthusiastic dishwashing, the incidents of broken crockery increased, and therefore the solution was to buy a dishwasher.

Eleven months had passed, and our new family appeared to be happy with each other.

Then on 10th June, 1976, we are told that Ciarán was the victim of a car accident, and it would be necessary to amputate his left leg to save his life. Was June 1976 to become July 1975?

Joan and I had 60 years of a happy married life. Joan died in 2018 aged eighty-four. All the children are now in their 50s and 60's living in various parts of the UK and Ireland and we all keep in contact with each other.

Ciarán, Patricia, Paula and Catherine all have academic degrees and Una, actor, and singer, has a successful theatrical agency in Blackpool. Catherine obtained a degree in music, then had high-power jobs in commercial banks in London before building and operating four cottages as B&B in Bunratty, County Clare. Patricia is a lawyer. Paula is a Maths teacher and Ciarán is a writer. Joan obtained a Cert.Ed., I obtained a Cert.Ed., a B.Ed., and a Diploma in Education. Not bad for a family that went through so much. Oh, my hair is pure white.

1971

Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, Involve me and I learn
- Benjamin Franklin

It is now 1971 and I was content as a Lecturer in the Telecommunications Department of City College for Further Education London... I had moved to the College in 1966 from the Independent Television Authority. After training, I was appointed the College's first Student Counsellor. My class contact time was reduced to seven hours a week and I had my own new office in which to speak with students who needed my help. My wife, Joan, had just qualified as a teacher, with Home Economics as her main subject. Joan was offered a teaching post in the school, local to us, where she had spent time as part of her training.

Maybe as an encouragement to Joan to accept the offer, the Head of the Technology Department in the school asked me if I would join the school to introduce Electronics into the curriculum. I was assured that there would be money in the department's budget to introduce the subject. I said yes to the suggestion and joined the school.

Because there was no money in the budget for me to introduce Electronics just then, I spent my first-year teaching less able pupils various skills such as enamelling small copper items or making brackets from soft wood. Skills I had to learn from an experienced craft teacher. The school budget for my second year in the school again did not have any money for electronics.

Joan was appointed head of home economics at another school. That school contacted me, and they assured me that they would find the necessary funds to introduce the subject. I moved to that school. Again, funds failed to appear. I was beginning to wonder if I was offered teaching posts by the schools to entice Joan to join them.

That school was divided into Lower, Middle and Upper School with a Headmaster in total charge. The positions of Heads of both the Lower and Middle school became vacant during my second year in the school. On interview I was appointed Head of both schools. The headmaster made the decisions, I took the responsibility. A very clever move on his part! I took responsibility for the teaching of science to the slow learners in my schools.

I retired from teaching some thirty-five years ago but some incidents are still very vivid. Like the time when, to consolidate my teaching of the science of Flight, to my pupils I obtained a simple Flight Simulation program to use on our computer. When we ordered the 'Pet' make computer from the Education office in the local Council we were asked "*Who would feed the pet during holiday time*"! Someone in that department needed to be educated.

When the pupils heard that they were about to use the programme they insisted that they should sit during the lesson as if they were in an aircraft. Chairs were arranged each side of an aisle. With one of their number seated in front operating the computer as "pilot". The "pilot" would not be told what to do-with his "I know what to do, Sir" attitude, of course take off was a disaster and the aeroplane crashed. The 'passengers' threw themselves onto the floor with shouts of "*My leg is broken*", and "*Help me*" and other such cries of distress. The headmaster happened to be passing the classroom at the time and it took some serious explanations to convince him that there was an educational side to the situation.

There was another occasion when the Head teacher wanted to speak to a pupil in my Middle school. A serious complaint had been made against the boy. The boy in question had a reputation for violence. He was in the gym, so I went to collect him. As soon as I called him, he made a rush at me with his fist ready to land a punch. I defended myself by raising my hands and in so doing his face hit my hand. I maintained he ran into my closed fist! He just stood there looking at me.

I took him to the Head's office where the whole incident was related. The Head told me that it was a very serious matter and reflected on the reputation of the school. He said he would have to contact the parents. Later that afternoon I was told that the father of the boy would be in the school at 9 am the next morning and that he wanted to see me. The next morning, I was in the head's office by 9 am. In came the father of the lad. He looked at me and said, "*Are you the man who punched my son*"? I nodded and he came towards me with his right hand outstretched and said, "*Shake my hand, he needed that*".

ENTER THE GALLOPING MAJOR

There was a drama group at Brentwood cathedral called the Cathedral Players, I was a member of that group. Soon after joining the secondary education sector, a group from another town presented an Old Time Musical show in our parish hall. I suggested to the Cathedral Players that we could perform an Old-Time Music Hall show ourselves. The Group said that we should try it, provided I agreed to produce it.

Where does one start? I had a stroke of luck when I mentioned that I was considering producing this show in the parish. I was contacted by a lady who offered to give me music that may be suitable. The music was a musical goldmine. One book contained about fifty old time musical songs. Now I had the music but I needed the artist to perform it. A few of the Cathedral Players were very good singers and they agreed to join the musical group. Two or three of the others said that they would agree to take speaking parts. Other parishioners and friends asked to join the group, among them were a few musicians. After a few weeks the group consisted of about twenty players. Not everyone was available for every show. We had the traditional Chairman. Except that our Chairman refused to wear his glasses at the show and I suggested that we had a Chairman's Lady who read the script to him. The chairman was excellent, introducing every act with 'flowery' words. For example, our female pianist was introduced as "*That damsel of digital dexterity*"

I put together a show with an opening chorus, and solo acts of singing and monologues. First half would conclude with a one act melodrama. Second half would be like the first half with solo acts and chorus, finishing with a chorus and a rendition of *Land of Hope and Glory*.

After a few weeks of rehearsal one night a week, we felt that we were ready for the public. Our first outing was in the local parish hall. The hall was set up with tables and chairs and a bar was available. I felt that after a few beers the audience would accept what we had to offer. The first show was a great success, so much so, that we asked to repeat the show at other locations. We performed mostly in parish halls and always for charity.

After a year or two we had gained some recognition as an entertaining show. One occasion we were approached by a professional magician who was 'resting' and he asked if he could perform with us. Of course, we were delighted. He did one or two shows with us and then went back on to the professional stage.

I was also approached by a professional actor who had suffered from severe stage fright. He wanted to get back into the profession and thought by working with us he could regain his confidence. He didn't have an excellent singing voice. I decided that I could build an act around the musical song, the Galloping Major. The pianist would play the opening notes of the tune in the time of a gallop. He would come on stage and gallop around the stage as if on a horse, and then sing two verses of Galloping Major. He rehearsed for several weeks and then he said he was ready to do a show. He was dressed in a makeshift cavalry officer's uniform of the Victorian period, complete with Pith helmet.

I stood in the wings with him while the pianist played the gallop. I indicated to him when it was his time to make an entrance and he just froze. The pianist stopped and started the gallop again he just could not move. Without thinking I galloped on stage in my evening dress.



Old Time Music Hall Group.

I couldn't remember the words of the second verse so decided to do another gallop which the pianist joined with the gallop music. After one or two rounds of the stage I still had not remembered all of the second verse so decided to get the audience involved. I asked the pianist to play the gallop again and this time suggested to the audience they jump up and down in the seats in time to the music. Some joined in, others just sat there, so remembering the Sergeant in the TV show *'It Ain't half Hot Mum'* I said something like, *"I don't want no 'amby-pamb' movement. When I says Bump, you Bump in your chair"*. This was in the second half and the beer and wine was taking effect so people started to 'bump and pump' in their chairs and enjoy it. The actor did not go back to the profession, and I took the part for myself and became known as 'The Galloping Major'. We did this show in another church hall in the town and the day after the show I was stopped in the street by a man who asked me how I got a horse onto the stage! Which was it, my skill as an actor or the influence of a few beers?

The Musical Hall Show had strong family influence, as my wife Joan, was the Chairman's Lady and also had solo parts, and my daughter Catherine, was our first pianist until she went to college.

I stayed as producer for about six years until the PMR attack started and I had commenced part-time study for my B.Ed.

IT ALL BECAME TOO MUCH

Getting to know other parents at 'school gate meetings' in the mid to late 60's, was unknown, as it was safe to allow children to walk to and from school. We made friends through our attendance at church. There were three other couples of our own age that became friends. We would meet for dinner several times a year. All of us were caravanners. We found a caravan site near us with a woodland and a field in which the children played together. While the children were small we all went there about every six weeks or so, for a long weekend.

When our family expanded with the arrival of Paula, Patricia and Ciarán O'Meara, those friends became remarkably, even closer friends. Their children welcomed our new children into their company. The caravan weekends became more important, and afforded Joan and me time to relax.

Then we had Ciarán's accident, when a car driving on the wrong side of the road mounted a pavement and hit him. He was in hospital about three days when I was asked to meet the surgeons. They told me that the situation was serious and that the wound was infected, and amputation would be necessary to save Ciarán's life. They then told me it would be necessary for me to see the wound before I could give my consent to the operation.

I have a symptom that reacts on seeing wounds, or blood. My feet, from toes to shins feel as if they are in a tight clamp. I will not describe the wound, suffice to say I realised that it was infected and that the leg could not be saved. My feet took hours to return to normal, I kept seeing the wound in my mind.

I now had to explain to Ciarán what would happen. He was showing talent as a gymnast, he was also a strong swimmer. Telling someone like that, that they were about to lose a leg was heartbreaking.

For some months before this, I was showing signs of irritability, both at home and in the classroom. My wife Joan did notice it, and at times it caused friction between us. I ignored the way I behaved.

It was our turn to host a dinner party. Four of our friends were present. Joan, being a Home Economics teacher, was an excellent cook and everything from the laying of the table to the wine served was done with perfection. The evening was full of laughter and banter, and everyone was enjoying themselves. Later in the meal I excused myself to go to the toilet. When I returned everyone was laughing. I took it that they were laughing at me. I started to shout at them and grabbed a bottle of wine from the table and went into the kitchen and opened the serving hatch into the dining room. I stood in kitchen drinking from the bottle and continued to shout at our guests. I am very unclear as to what happened next. I am told that I started to sob loudly.

My friends helped to put me to bed.

Joan came with me to my doctor the next day. He said my outburst the night before had saved me from a serious mental breakdown. He recommended a course of medication. The course lasted almost two years. While on this medication I would see situations, had they happened without the medication I would have reacted badly to them, now they sailed over me.

At the time of Ciarán's accident the twins were finishing their primary education. We were advised that they would benefit from boarding school education. They were accepted into a school about an hour's drive from us. One disadvantage was that they had to be collected every second weekend on a Friday and return to school on Sunday evening. They enjoyed boarding school life but looked forward to the weekends at home.

Ciarán made a successful recovery from his operation. That summer, our caravanning friends insisted that we all had a long break at our favourite caravan park. We were also joined by Maureen and Ron from Manchester with their family. The park owners allowed us to park our caravans in the field next to the woodland. The children were delighted. There was a swimming pool in another part of the site and the owners reserved that for our children, including Ciarán for an hour every day.

Joan and I now realised that we were not on our own. It made a significant difference to us to know that we could call for help should we need it.

My breakdown also made us both realise that we should take life day by day.

HEALTH

Health is not valued till sickness comes
- Thomas Fuller

I had considered myself to be healthy, then about 2005 I developed pains in what appeared to be all of my muscles. My GP discovered that I had Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR). A consultant prescribed a course of steroids, and the severe pains were reduced. However, I stayed on a reduced prescription of steroids for about the next five years. I suffered from severe fatigue with little strength in my arms and legs. This condition forced Joan and me to give up our favourite hobby, caravanning. There is no known cause for this illness it just suddenly happens, and to my joy disappears as quickly. The consultant told me that it could return at any time. If it does it will have to fight for a place in my system!

By 2015 the pain from most of my body almost disappeared. I still suffered from a very painful knee joint. An X-ray showed that I needed to have the knee joint replace. Four days after the operation when the staff were preparing me to go home, they were evaluating to see how I would manage stairs. I complained of a pain in my chest. The nurse called a doctor, the doctor called an ambulance and within an hour I was in another hospital. There tests showed that I needed a triple bypass. The operation was successful.

By now I was collecting consultants as one collects collectables.

I underwent both operations over a five-week period. This left me weak and also a source of great worry to my wife Joan. By now our daughter Catherine had built four cottages in Bunratty County Clare which she rented on a bed and breakfast basis.

In 2017 Joan and I went over to Bunratty for Christmas and New Year. We fell in love with the area and as we had planned for a long time to retire to Ireland, we decided on County Clare.

Around now I began to suffer pains in my lower back, tests showed that I had a nerve trapped in my lower spine. The consultant (another one for the collection) said that it was operable and arranged for me to be admitted to hospital. I was prepared for the operation and wheeled into the operating theatre, the next thing that I remember was the doctor standing by my bed saying, *"you gave us a hairy ten minutes"*, he then explained that I was allergic to one of the drugs in the anaesthetic and had to be revived. I was told that as a result it would be impossible to free the nerve. I am now on a drug that stops nerve pains and expect to be on them for the rest of my life. Because of the trapped nerve, my brain and feet are not communicating, and I have difficulty in walking.

In 2017 Joan and I again went to Bunratty for Christmas and the New Year. We found a property that we liked and put an offer in on it. On New Year's Eve Joan collapsed. This had happened to her three times in Brentwood during 2017. Each time she was admitted to hospital and discharged within a few days, with no conclusion as to why she was falling. When she collapsed in Bunratty she was taken by ambulance to Limerick hospital. An MRI test showed that she had severe brain damage. The consultant advised us that Joan would need 24/7 care. She was suffering from Alzheimer's. This was the first time we were given a reason as to why she was falling.

We were lucky to get the last remaining place in the new nursing home in Brentwood. This home catered for people suffering from Alzheimer's. Joan was only in that home for a couple of weeks when she suffered severe pain in her left cheek and had to be admitted to hospital.

It is now 2021 and ill health has followed me. I developed chest pains and was seen by 4 cardiologists. They agreed that I needed to have a valve replaced in my heart. I will not describe the operation. It was conducted without an anaesthetic. I am delighted with the outcome. No more chest pains no more breathlessness.

I had known for years that I had an enlarged prostate but was told it was not malignant. In December 2023, my PSA went as high as 50 plus. A full body scan showed that I now had prostate cancer and it had spread to my rib cage. I was seen by an oncologist within a couple of weeks and was prescribed a series of injections, one a month for three months then one every six months. My PSA now reads 0.25 and the oncologist says that that shows the cancer is being attacked. I would urge all men to have their prostate checked and PSA taken when they reach the age of forty and have regular tests after that.

I know that I could not have survived the series of illnesses I have recounted, without the help and support from my darling wife Joan and now my family. Prayer played no small part in my recovery from the various illnesses.



Family Gathering Christmas 2017.

FAMILY GATHERING CHRISTMAS 2017

Our family is now long scattered, living mostly in the Home Counties of England. The family consists of our two daughters Catherine and Una and Joan's nieces Patricia and Paula and their brother Ciarán. The three of them came to live with us when their parents were killed in the car accident in 1975.

The family likes to get together as often as possible, but it is traditional that everyone comes together at Christmas time.

This year, after discussion, we agreed that 19th December would be the date for the family gathering.

While Christmas dinner was intended for our own family, members of the extended family sometimes asked if they could join us. This year Paula's three children, and two of her brothers, Desmond and Brian will be joining us, Paula's husband, Andy, and Una's husband Michael, make a total of ten persons dining. We extended the dining room table to its full length and the kitchen table was added at the end to accommodate everyone.

By noon all have arrived, some staying in the local hotel while others will be driving home after the dinner. The house is filled with laughter and banter. It is strange that I had not missed these sounds until I hear them once more in the home. Now we know that the family is complete again.

I often wonder if all parents notice that when a family member comes to stay overnight and then goes out visiting, you lie in bed, half asleep waiting for the sound of the key in the door. Then, knowing that they are home safely, you can drift back to sleep. It may be the parental instinct of wanting to care for your children that is awakened when they are back home.

Joan and I decorate the room with holly and festive garlands, the decorations include the Christmas tree that we bought when Catherine was a year old. It was one of the first imitation Christmas trees on the market but very realistic. The Crib takes pride of place under the Christmas tree.

It is now time to lay the table and do the preparations in the kitchen. The majority lend a hand, some are in the kitchen preparing the vegetables or making the various stuffings for the three-bird roast, while others help in the dining room. The traditional Christmas tablecloth with an elegant festive motif is used, with a gold runner down the centre of the table. The black and white dinner service, in the sideboard since last year is taken out. Because of the occasion our Waterford wine glasses are also used. Some find an opportunity to chat and have a drink and sometimes issue unnecessary instructions to those laying the table. The instructions are often greeted with cries of “*come on then you show me how to do it*” or “*put down that glass and give us a hand.*” Comments and answers are greeted with smiles.

Everyone contributes in one way or another to the dinner, no one comes empty handed.

Joan's contribution is her now famous *Syllabub trifle*. The trifle has macaroon and amaretti biscuits, white grapes, and strawberries. It is assembled in a deep glass bowl so that one can see the construction. The macaroons in the bottom of the glass dish are softened with sweet Sherry. Then there are alternate layers of mixed grapes and halved strawberries and amaretti biscuits. These layers are softened with some brandy. The fruit and biscuits are covered with a whipped cream.

The whole construction is topped with a syllabub. The syllabub is made with icing sugar, lemon zest and a little drop of brandy. Just looking at it in the glass bowl acts on one's anticipation, like Pavlov's bell. The common name for this dish is *Boozy trifle*, a very fitting name!

The 3-bird roast has two different stuffings, one is made from sausage meat and breadcrumbs and herbs, and the other is breadcrumbs, herbs and finally chopped onions. The birds are prepared by laying a boned Capon with legs and wings still attached with the skin side down. A layer of sausage meat stuffing is spread on the bird and two duck breasts are placed one at each side of the capon. A little of the breadcrumb stuffing is placed between the two duck breasts. Sausage meat stuffing is then applied, and two pigeon breasts are placed one at each side. The whole assembly is carefully rolled up and stitched.

The heat in the kitchen and the smells of the various ingredients used fill the whole house with the aroma of Christmas. It may be that the same smell is there at other times of the year but at Christmas it is special.

Someone in the dining room has found a CD of Christmas music, and family members join Bing Crosby singing *White Christmas*. Even though we have heard this tune in every store that we went into, for the last weeks, hearing it sung by, I think, Una and Ciarán, brings the spirit of Christmas nearer to me. While our family are not a von Trapp family but when it comes to singing, I enjoy listening to them. A family singing or laughing together or even just being together at Christmas time, emphasises the true meaning of Christmas, that is, extending love and peace to everyone.

It is time to eat. Every dish, from the 70's style Prawn Cocktail starter to the flaming Christmas pudding, draws compliments from around the table. It may be the wine had influence.



L to R Daire O'Connell, Me, Laurence (Joan Power's Son) Jason Murphy, Maria Colfer. Una Evans -O'Connell, Paul Philips, Rory O'Shea, Suzanne Billington, Joe Colfer. All Family relations

Little did we know that this dinner would be the last family Christmas we would spend together. Later that month, Joan was taken ill, and she died the following February.

The married ones now host their in-laws at Christmas. They also issue invitations to others in our family to join them.

I was born in Lismore Co Waterford in 1933. After Leaving Cert, I trained as a Radio Officer and then went to sea for about 3 years. On coming ashore I joined ITA as a transmission engineer. I was married in 1958. In 1966 while stationed in Belfast I applied for a position of Lecturer in Telecommunications in City College for FE London and was offered the post. I remained at City College until I was invited to go into Secondary Education to introduce Electronics into the curriculum. No money in the budget so no Electronics. Same story with another school who made the same offer to me. I stayed in that school and retired when I was 55 years of age as Head of Lower and Middle school. Now living in Co Clare with my daughter.

