

Radio Days



Eugene O'Rourke was voted Melbourne's Irish-Australian of the Year in 2002, has received an award from Comhaltas Ireland for the promotion of Irish music outside Ireland, and an award from the Victorian government for excellence in multicultural media. In the Australia-wide Australia Day awards in 2016, he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for services to media.

This is his story

For as long as I can remember I have always had an interest in radio. Indeed there has always been a radio in our house, even before the 2nd World War, in 1939. In those days we called it 'the wireless' and not 'the radio'. The wireless in our house sat on a high shelf, away from little hands, in the kitchen. It had two batteries, one dry and one wet. The wet one was a glass jar which contained acid and had two connections at the top. I was told by good authorities that there were few radios in Ballinamore, Co Leitrim at that time. I was also told that even before I was born in 1941, the house would be 'full' of local farmers by

five to nine every evening to hear the nine o'clock news on the BBC. It was important for them to know how the war was going and what prices they were going to get for their products.

By 1946 I was able to climb on a chair and then climb onto the table and reach the wireless. From my long observations, I knew which knob switched on the wireless and that it was also the volume control. When to the horror of my parents they discovered that I could reach the wireless and turn it on, they gave me a strong telling off: 'What if you fell off the table!', 'What if the wet battery fell on you, the acid would burn you to the bone!' Only one thing for it, move the table to the middle of the kitchen, away from the wireless. However, within a year or two, I was able to reach the wireless and connect myself with the outside world. As well as listening to the limited BBC and to the very limited broadcasting hours on Radio Eireann one of my joys was to try to listen on a Saturday evening to the AFN (American Forces Network) broadcasting from Cologne in Germany. They played jazz. My father would



scream "Turn off that infernal noise!" and my mother called it 'Jungle music' and 'A waste of a good battery'.

Time, as they say, moves on and by the mid 50's the wireless, with its two batteries, one dry and one wet, gave way to the electric radio. This was a great boost to my listening habits as there was no need to worry about the batteries. I could now pick up 'foreign' stations, with the help of the weather. One station I recall from central Europe was Radio Czechoslovakia. It had an English language programme which praised the Communist system and how happy all their workers were, so much so that none of them wanted to leave. There were other European stations like Radio Luxembourg, which were more pleasing to young ears.

Then in the sixties, everything changed with the arrival of the transistor. Now we could go for a walk 'Down the road', bring our transistors and there was no one there to tell us to turn off 'That rubbish'. By this time I had a job and was able to buy a twelve band radio and listen to radio stations from all over Europe. Even though I could not understand a word they were saying, I loved their songs and music and strange musical instruments. I could pick up radio broadcasts from the USA and Canada and even from trawlers on the high seas

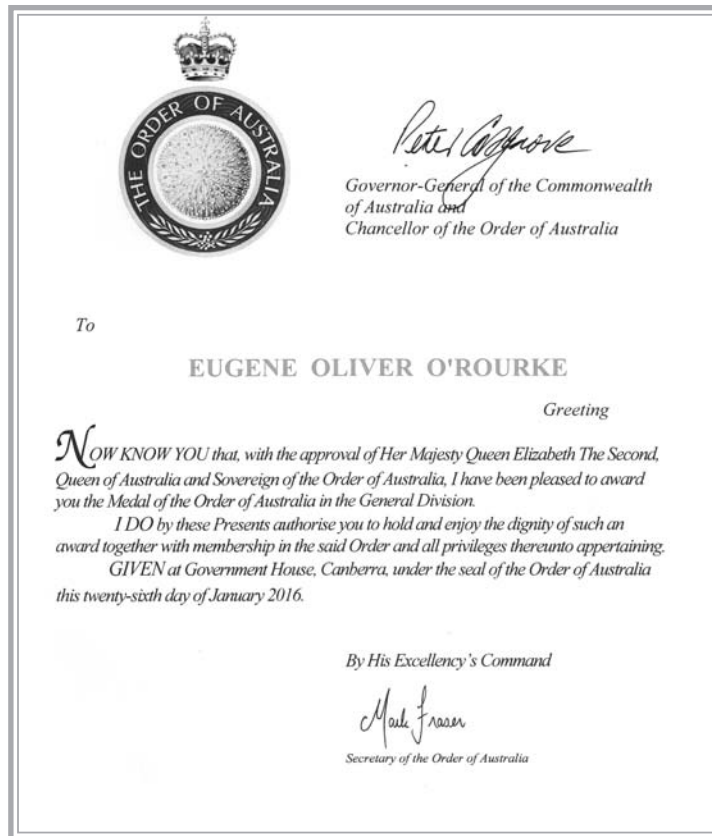
As they say, all good things come to an end, I decided to leave Ireland. On the 3rd of February 1971, I left a bitterly cold Ireland. My first stop was Heathrow airport, London. The snowstorm was so bad that there

was a fear that the plane for Australia would not take off. There was a break in the weather and to our delight, we took off. I arrived in Australia on the 5th of February at the height of their summer. I will never forget walking down the steps of

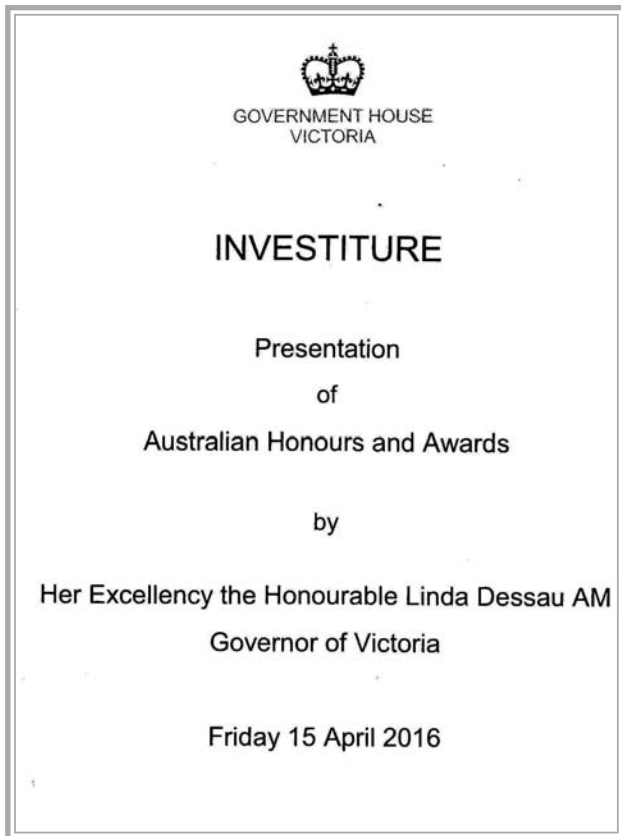
the aircraft in my three piece Donegal tweed suit into 35 degrees heat (95 degrees F). I thought I was walking into a furnace. I still have my three piece suit but have only worn it twice since then.

Australia today is nothing like the Australia of the early 70's. Melbourne, my place of residence, was a city built in the Victorian era. It had lovely wide streets, beautiful parks, and magnificent Victorian mansions. At that time it had about eight or nine commercial radio stations and two non-commercial stations run by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (the ABC). As I had grown up listening to the non-commercial BBC and Radio Eireann, with its limited advertisements, I could not take to the mindless fare dished up on the Melbourne commercial stations.

In December 1972 the Australian



Labour Party was elected to the national parliament for the first time in over 25 years. The leader of the party at that time was Gough Whitlam. Their campaign slogan was 'It's Time': time to change everything as we knew it. As they say, change the government and you change the nation. One of the things the Whitlam government did was to open up the airwaves to more stations. The commercial stations were opposed to this, but the government got its way and two new stations opened on the AM band. The ABC was approached and asked what they would like. ABC Sydney went for a Youth pop station, 2JJ, while ABC Melbourne's licence was to be used to create a public access station, later to be called 3ZZ. But what is an access station and what effect would it have on the Australian community? It would give a voice to the minority



world. On weekdays from 5 pm to 10.30 p.m. all the programmes were in a foreign language: German, Dutch, Greek, etc. Each group was allocated at least a half an hour broadcasting time. Depending on the size of the group, some were allocated two or three half hour time slots throughout the week. A co-ordinator from each group was appointed to oversee the smooth running of that

about broadcasting. However, the ABC staff were very encouraging and said 'not to worry' as they would do all the technical work so that all I had to do was to write my script and supply the music. The following Saturday I did my first Irish program. As I was not an 'Ethnic Person' they put me in with the English language groups. For the first time the Irish community heard a real Irish person, playing real Irish music on a Melbourne radio station. The opening theme for 3ZZ every evening at 5 pm, was 'Morning Dew' by the Chieftains.

3ZZ was born in 1974 under a Labour Government and it suffered the same fate as many other social innovations of that time. In June 1977, entirely for political reasons, the Federal Government forced the ABC to close its multi-lingual public access station 3ZZ in Melbourne. The closure was unprecedented in Australian broadcasting history and represented a dangerous erosion of our freedom of communication. The Government created another broadcasting organisation, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which makes no pretence of independence from direct Government control.

In 1985 I got an invitation to join a group in their push to have a multi-cultural radio station in Melbourne. In 1989 we were granted a licence and went to air in June of that year. What excitement and jubilation: the 'class of 1974' was back again and on air. The Irish were given their current time slots, 11 am Saturday, and 6 pm on Sunday. I was elected to the Council — the Board of Management —

groups who were not catered for by the ABC or the commercial radio stations. The commercial stations were increasingly dominated by a few large networks owned chiefly by newspaper magnates. The ABC was an outpost of the British Empire, mostly networked and pre-recorded. Fewer and fewer live local programmes programs were being produced. Both networks were out of touch with the changing face of Australia. The very nature of an access radio would create broadcasts on social, cultural and political life. If everyone turned up and demanded access to their airwave, how would they cope with all those requests? Who would write scripts in all those foreign languages?

The ABC seconded four of their staff to set up this unique access station - the first of its kind in the

group on air, the writing of scripts and the choice of music.

The weekends were given over to English language programs. Programs were made by the Classical Guitar Society, the Bing Crosby Society, the Blind Society and The National Council for Jewish Women, to name but a few. There were jazz programs, Folk, Blues, Classical music, R&R, Country and Western, Rock and Reggae.

The people came in their hundreds to make programs and the listeners loved it. It was, as the call sign said: "The station where the people make the programs".

I rang 3ZZ and told them how much I was enjoying the 'new station'. They asked me what kind of music I had and when I replied I had a lot of Irish music, they said 'That's what we want to hear!' and invited me in for a chat. I had never been in a radio station and knew nothing

of this new station, 3ZZZ. I was also elected convenor of the Irish broadcasting group, a position I still hold.

A few years later I started training new broadcasters from all ethnic groups on all aspects of broadcasting: our code of ethics, media law, court proceedings, interviewing, preparing a program, presenting a program and operating the panel. 3ZZZ has over 60 ethnic groups, each with its own convenor. I am the chairperson of the convenors' committee and for many years was also the chairperson of the programming committee.

One of the great joys of my life is to see these migrants, some of them refugees, who do not have English as their first, second or even

sometimes their third language, learn how to be a broadcaster and then to see them a few months later presenting a program in their own language. This is very rewarding. All the broadcasters and panel operators, including myself, are unpaid volunteers.

The 3ZZZ Irish broadcast group is very popular with the other nationalities using the station. We punch well above our weight, as we are on various committees. Our broadcasters come from all parts of Ireland and from all walks of life. Our ages range from 20 to close to 90. Our music varies with each presenter. I never interfere with a presenter's program and that's what makes them all so enjoyable.

On a more personal note, I always play something from Leitrim: Margaret O'Rourke, the McNamara Family, Aughavas, Mary McPartland, Lisa Ward, The Leitrim Equation and any others I can get my hands on. We must keep the flag flying.

Radio in Melbourne has changed in many ways since I arrived here in the early 70's. The ABC now has about ten stations, all broadcasting 24 hours a day. The commercial stations are still there, but more importantly, we now have over 40 community radio station, most of which have an ethnic content.

It has been a long and interesting journey from listening in Ballinamore to our wireless with its wet and dry batteries, to FM and Digital broadcasting in Melbourne, Australia.

Under the Thatch: Memories of a Longford Childhood

Seán Ó Súilleabháin

Seán Ó Súilleabháin has lived in Ballinamore for the past forty years, but he spent his first eighteen years "Under the Thatch" in North Longford, in a house with no electricity, running water or toilet. There were few tarred roads and you would stand and watch if you heard a car approaching. Most rural people lived in similar houses then.

Under the Thatch: Memories of a Longford Childhood is a brilliant memoir of life in the 1950s and 1960s and has been enthusiastically received throughout Leitrim and Longford. The book was launched at three venues to packed audiences in Ballinamore, Longford, and his native Colmcille at the end of October.

Chapters deal with diverse subjects including religion, education, farming, dancing, céilíng, politics, emigration, and football with humorous stories from Seán's wealth of recollections.

Life and living has undergone a transformation since then, but the two least expected changes, in Seán's view, are the decline in religious practice and the demise of the dance hall.

The book has an extensive exploration of the words and phrases that can be heard in Longford, and indeed in Leitrim, but cannot be found in the standard English dictionary. Seán has concluded that about half of them are from the Irish language and survived the Anglicisation process and the "murder machine" of the 19th century national schools and the rest are from Old English.

The book is available in shops in Longford and South Leitrim as well as in Sligo, Galway and Dublin. Hardbacks retail at €25 and paperbacks at €20. If you want further information please contact the author Seán Ó Súilleabháin directly at sosuilleabhain9@eircom.net.

