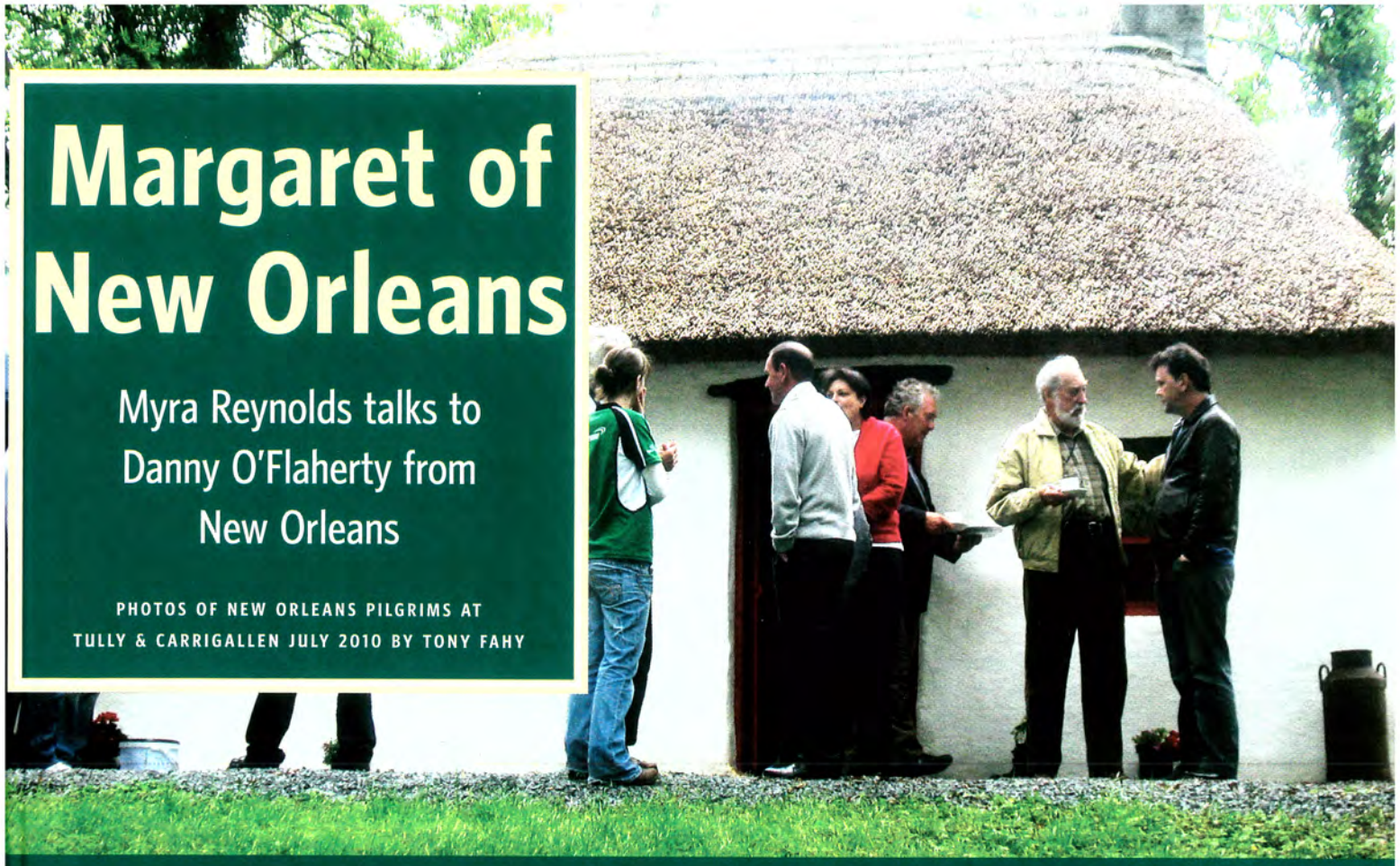
Margaret of New Orleans

Myra Reynolds talks to Danny O'Flaherty from New Orleans

PHOTOS OF NEW ORLEANS PILGRIMS AT TULLY & CARRIGALLEN JULY 2010 BY TONY FAHY



Myra: The performance of Maura Williamson's play about the story of Margaret of New Orleans by the Leitrim Youth Theatre Company (Carrigallen) in the Corn Mill, was brilliant! Would you agree Danny?

Danny: It was delightful...how good it was...how those kids did an American story of an Irish woman. And I meant it last year sincerely...I went home loaded with stories and trying to get people to go the extra mile in getting the kids over from Ireland to New Orleans...having an exchange between Louisiana and Leitrim. We're hoping it will still happen.

Though Margaret is from Carrigallen, her story is the Delta Region in Louisiana. So when you look at the size of what she did...

Myra: Yes, she did achieve a lot for one woman?

Danny Yes, for one woman, you can include the whole state of Lousianna, of what she did for the region...the Delta regions.

Myra: How big is that region in comparison to Ireland?

Danny: I'd say that Lousianna is about the same size as the whole country of Ireland.

Myra: Is she well-known there or is it just in certain Irish communities?

Danny: People have forgotten...they are not into the history books...they forget where they are from... there are people in New Orleans—there are people on this tour with me, from New Orleans, that don't know about her. There's a lady with us, who is a lawyer, who passes her statue every day, doesn't know anything about her, didn't know she was from Ireland, knew that she was a woman that had done great things for the city of New Orleans, but didn't know where she was from. So my Mission for the past 25 years, since I came to Orleans in 1984 for the Worlds fair, is to promote

and show who she was and is. Margaret of New Orleans, from Ireland.

Myra: Margaret was a woman who had a lot of loss and personal tragedy in her life. How do you account for the fact that she was so giving and where did it come from, that whole goodness?

Danny: I think it comes from here...it comes from the Irish people themselves. I came here with a group of people from New Orleansand they have have all enjoyed the experience of being with the people of Leitrim. We're from different countries, different tribes. At the end of the day, it's people to people—that's what counts! We are all trying to feed our families, put roofs on our houses, We have that in common. Every time that I bring tours to Ireland, wherever I come to, I get them all to meet with the local people if possible. They were just blown away today to see how the people of Carrigallen came out today to greet them. To be with them. That doesn't happen very often. They are saying today, that of all the things we've done, this is the best.

Myra: So today was the highlight?

Danny: Absolutely! And it all boils down to 'people to people' I think that the heart—the welcome that was given to us is basically the spirit of the community and the spirit of the Irish people. And Margaret just brought that heart and that spirit with her even though she left at an early age. We are influenced by the early years of our lives...she got that here and carried it with her for the rest of her life. That good naturedness started with the

■ *Above: Danny O'Flaherty in conversation with local playwright Maura Williamson*

■ *Below: Megan O'Reilly preparing to learn some Margaret songs!*

■ *Danny entertains in the Kilracken Arms in Carrigallen with the other pilgrims from New Orleans*

Irish heart because the Irish are naturally like that. And I think the way that the people of Carrigallen today conducted themselves is a testimony to the people here, to the hearts and kindness that is part of Leitrim.

Myra: There was certainly a feeling of brotherhood there today.

Absolutely. You had to be there to see it. There are 45 million in America claiming Irish descent.

Myra: It's interesting that you and Tony both have the same concept of Margaret as the 'Heart' of New Orleans'?

Absolutely, I almost could not sing after Tony did that last song 'The Heart of New Orleans', he did it acappella and he did it Seanós as well, which is very very close to the soul of New Orleans music, of Jazz, Creole etc, there are so many hardships and things that people are dealing with in New Orleans, people recovering from Katrina and other storms since then, and the recent oil crisis.

There is a song that I co-wrote which I've done for RTE on the 5th anniversary of Katrina. The story is about a couple from Co Leitrim that were on honeymoon in the French Quarter, stuck in New Orleans during Katrina. I had so much difficulty in singing that song, like the one Tony did today. We have so much in common when you consider Margaret leaving Tully here...seems to me, one of the things I find on my travels, whether it be Canada, the US, Alaska, Argentina, there is something about the Irish person who goes overseas, they want to help! And then there's Margaret who takes it out of the ballpark totally, but she does it in her own way, not for ego. Margaret is an inspiration to all of us, people today try not to be racist. She was totally colour blind! Even the people that don't know anything about her, whether she's from Ireland or Hong Kong, know that's she's achieved something great!

Myra: Is there an information plaque on her statue to say what she did there?

No, because she didn't want anything. She'd probably be disgusted that they put up a statue to her, 'just call me Margaret' she used to say...a lot of people couldn't pronounce he name: 'Haughrey'. So she would say just call me Margaret. And that's what's on the statue.

Myra: To change slightly Danny, you crossed Lake Ponchartrain in a currach!?

We have the *Margaret Currach Club* in New Orleans. We have built 16 currachs. We have brought five of the last boat builders in Ireland over to Louisiana, They built 16, the last four were made out of cypress wood. So it's the *Margaret Currach Club*, founded in 1991. Margaret was an integral part of what we did. We did a fund raiser recently to bring Irish boatbuilders from Clare, Galway & Kerry over to New Orleans in November. That's how serious it is with us. There are seven counties now with currach clubs. We have saved that way of life. When I crossed the Ponchartrain in the currach, it was completely in the spirit of Ireland.

Myra: There seems to be a lot of interest on her Facebook page in having her canonised.

That's true! I've heard from different sources over the last four or five years, but I've not bothered because it has been in too many hands. But right now, I feel that it will go further now that it's in the hands of T J Fisher. She is a driving force in presenting Margaret, and you can see for yourself on Facebook, the emails she is getting from other States in the US. So it's only a matter of time. It should have been done probably 50-60 years ago. She should have been put forward to be canonized, because, she is a Mother Teresa.

Myra: Yes, Tully deserves to be put on the tourist map, as it is her birthplace.

Yes it should be! I think it's an absolutely fantastic, wonderful story. I could tell you this now for sure, without being disrespectful or

smart!. If Margaret was a Kerry woman...

Myra: ...everybody would know her!

Yes...maybe it is one for Leitrim County Council to consider.

There's so much about Margaret that hasn't been touched on yet...the Facebook site is generating so much new material, it is growing by the minute.

Myra: What is the actual address on Facebook?

Go to the Facebook site (Google it!) and type in 'Beloved Margaret of New Orleans'. It currently has over 600 members. New Orleans is blunted by the situation currently in the gulf with the Oil Crisis. Everyone is still shell-shocked. But we'll be back on it soon!

Myra: Yes Danny, we all hope that New Orleans sees no more trouble and soon returns to its former glory. Thanks for your time, it was good to talk to you. We wish you a safe trip back to Louisiana.

Beloved Margaret of New Orleans
ON FACEBOOK

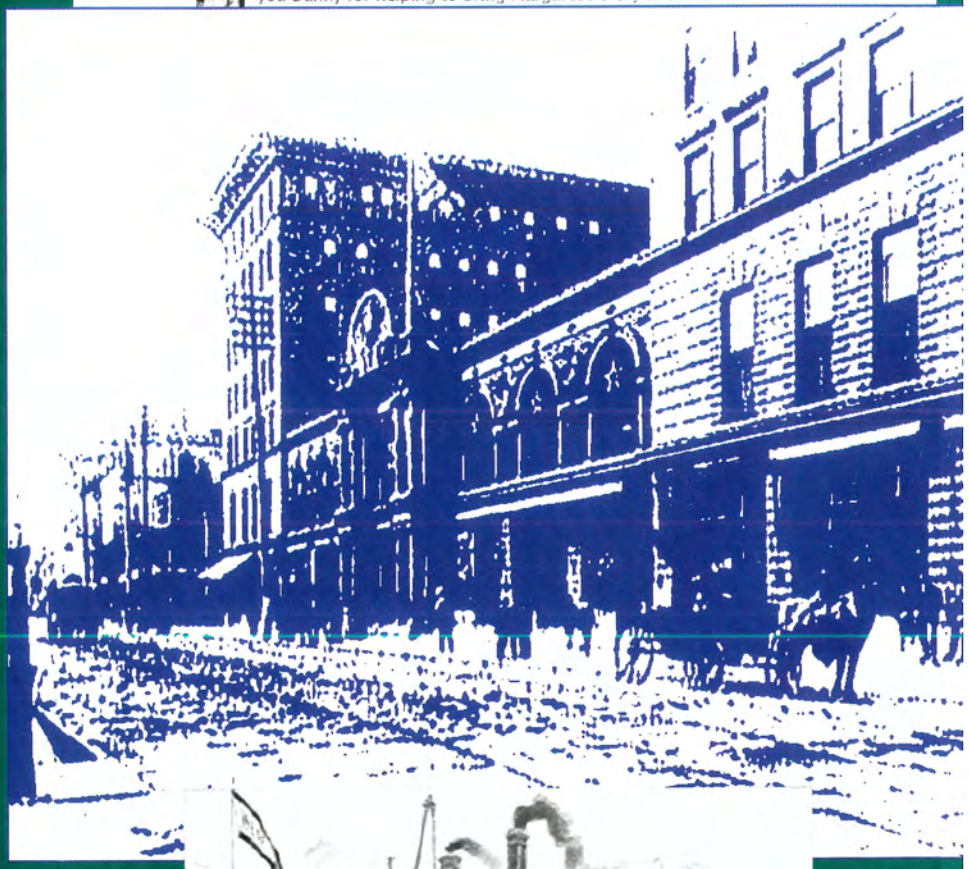
Danny O'Flaherty Because of Margaret, there were numerous orphanages and homes of the aged in New Orleans. Periodic yellow fever epidemics, especially the catastrophic scourge of 1853 that killed over 8,000 citizens, filled these institutions and necessitated the building of more.

In addition to orphans, mothers unable to care for thei...
See more
28 December 2009 at 14:05 · Comment · Like · Flag

Tj Fisher and 2 others like this.

Misha Filitov Yes, and – apparently – a good job was done. How pathetic that we have little-to-no paragons of such today. I think this is a story – "like an idea whose time has come" – that is ripe to shake us to our core.
30 December 2009 at 00:42 · Report

Beloved Margaret Haughery of New Orleans Thank you Danny for helping to bring Margaret's story to live.



■ *Top: St Charles Hotel where Margaret began her life in New Orleans as a laundress*

■ *Bottom: When 'cotton was king'...here in the Antebellum era of New Orleans, a shipment of Mississippi River cotton is being unloaded off the steamboat.*