

# VOICES

By  
Eugene McGloin

*'Do you hear voices? You do? Then you are possessed.'* Thus begins the religious rite of an exorcism. Writing about Leitrim ten years after first arriving in the county as a journalist is to engage, not so much in an exorcism, as to invigorate many inexorable voices.

Today, Carrick-on-Shannon has an automatic telephone exchange, but there was a one hour's delay into its old manual exchange on phone calls from Sligo town when written word first informed me that there was a vacancy for a junior reporter on the *"Leitrim Observer"* in 1974. You could thumb a lift faster!

In those days the paper's journalists - *Michael Oates* and myself - shared our office with the noisy printing press, which I affectionately refer to as a Heckler and Koch because it resembled a high-class assault weapon. Often, on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, when various stories were being updated, the first eight pages were rattling away on the press and you literally had to call *"stop press"* to Sean Doyle in order to conduct a phone call. Lots of a journalist's work is done on the telephone, listening to *"voices"* at the other end. The rest of the working week... well there was an offset printing

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machine operated by Dominic Duignan in another part of our *"office"* which chugged away daily like an amplified egg-beater.

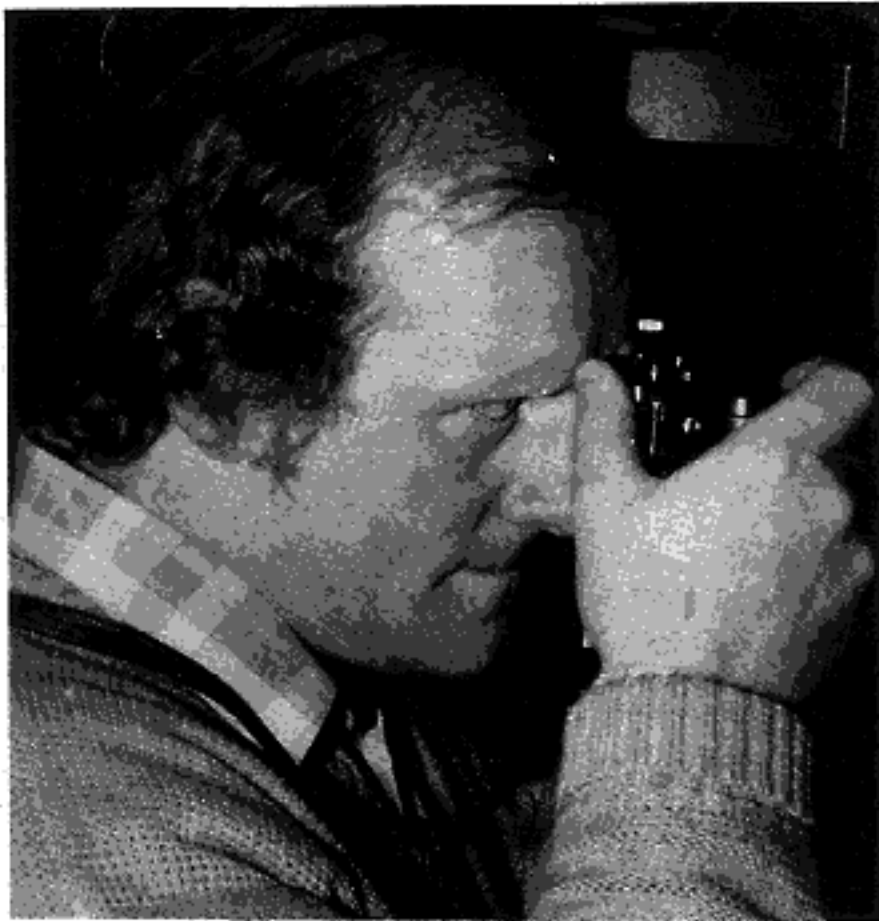
*Voices:* My first real *"stop press"* story broke the news that Protestant clergyman, *Canon William Slator*, had been chosen as the *Leitrim Man of the Year*. Today, *Canon Slator* and his wife *Dorothy* have retired to reside in a homely spot on Dun Laoghaire's Glenageary Road, five hundred yards from my own address. The name-plate - *"Carrick"* - on their front gate has a voice of its own; like all of us they found something endearing and durable about life in Leitrim.

*Voices:* broadcaster Mary Holland was interviewing the international author John McGahern on television five years ago when she used the inexplicable phrase: *"...you escaped from County Leitrim..."* The author hadn't escaped from anywhere and still lives in the county by free choice.

But Dublin journalists oftentimes have a restricted vision in terms of Leitrim. They categorise the county in terms of "snipe" or "snipers", poverty or Provos. Mary Holland's phrase evoked something more: a pastoral prison or an-open air lunatic asylum.

The national media, with a few notable exceptions, has a New Cromwellian attitude to County Leitrim. This is best exemplified in the attitude of the editor who changed a diary note on Carrick-on-Shannon Feis to a heading under "County Sligo" because he didn't want "Leitrim" - or "Roscommon" - appearing on the plate for the paper's "upmarket" readers.

The Laurence Crowley Receivership of the McCartin Brothers group of companies was treated in a "quirky" manner by a media which saw nothing morally wrong, or indeed evocative of our penal history, in the state giving a "dis-possessor" half a million pounds and yet not prepared to give a penny to help a native business empire born out of nothing more than rugged mountain and a dream realised on hard work and sacrifice.



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Not that we didn't make mistakes in Leitrim journalism. Oh no. Proof-reading was a laborious and time-consuming chore appended to journalists' duties before the paper went to press. The most memorable gem, spotted in time for correction, concerned the death report of a priest who had died on the African Missions. "... he was a devoted lover of ass during his years on the Missions" said the printed obituary submitted by Joe

Mooney. The word, of course, was "Mass" but if not, it would have opened up a new slant on those collections we used to have for the Black Babies in our national school.

Leitrim journalism recalls voices from beyond the grave well almost. The Kinlough correspondent wrote angrily one week: "I sent you some recent deaths from the area last week. They did not appear and now the people concerned want to know why". Was this the "medium" term consequences of not reporting local deaths? Maybe, but even Marshall McLuhan would have been hard pressed to accept that the "medium" was the message in that case!

This reminiscence on ten years in journalism recalls the faithful departed in the real sense, too. The late *Mary Kennedy* of Attyfinlay was the elder stateswoman on our newspaper crew in the Seventies. "Mrs K" brought a reserve and dignity to an office over-run with boisterous abandon of the sort that would often make a Glasgow Rangers' football outing look like the Teddy Bear's Picnic. And it was that riotous at times. There was the photographer who, when he said he was 'ready to shoot' was telling you that his gun was loaded and not his camera. On one memorable occasion, a Garda detective friend - the late and good *Christy Ryan* from Sligo - came upon our photographer lying face down in a ditch outside Manorhamilton with a loaded Magnum trained on the surrounding countryside. Truth to tell, the Gardai were so relieved it was "only a photographer" that no further fuss was created. We were the fittest journalistic team in Ireland. Our stories may not have been the most unbeatable but we sure were the fittest. We would finish our daily work with a football match in the office. Not an ordinary football match, you understand. The "ball" was a rubber-backed sponge from the Accounts Department. *Michael Oates* - it can now be "revealed exclusively" since he has gone into private business - particularly made his mark in those matches. On one occasion his shoe came off and left an ugly black mark on the roof (yes the roof) of the new offices.

Woodward and Bernstein would still be trying to unravel Watergate if *Richard Nixon* had consulted us on the essential elements of that cover-up!

*Michael Oates* was always the practical joker. Ringing this journalist with the most convoluted news stories from "anonymous" sources was an occupational hazard to be expected at all times when he was out of the office. It was the same for other members of the staff. *Gerry Taylor* of Carrick-on-Shannon once actually took time off work with worry after he had been contacted by a "member of the Garda Siochana" with a view to making a written statement after he had claimed to have been a witness to an accident which had a conflict of evidence during its real court hearing.

Then there was the male airline "booking clerk" who rang *Mary Ahearne* of Drumshanbo to cancel her Spanish holiday on the evening before she was due to leave. Staffs on other newspapers were contacted by "parish priests" and "Papal envoys" Pity, if you will, the harassed and over-worked telephonist at Carrick Exchange dutifully writing down *Mr. Oates* query: how much would it cost to book a person to

the familiar smile that has obstinacy, cheek, charm and devil-may-care all mullied into its mix.

There were other voices of advocacy and encouragement. Often remembered is the positive prompting of retired Carrick Vocational School Principal *Seamus Peyton* after I had inflicted my first scalpel wound on a Government Minister, making the case "for Leitrim" with regard to the other proposed Western Development Board of the



The Management and Staff of The Leitrim Observer on the occasion of a presentation to Michael Oates who left The Observer early this year to take over a newsagency and bookshop in Roscommon town. Michael is third from left in the second row.

person call to a *Mr. Makarios* in Cyprus at midnight tonight? One hour later, after frantic dialling and re-dialling to the international exchange in Dublin, the operator came back with the precise details and price ... only to be reminded that it was April Fools Day.

Voices: I have always wanted to find my own distinctive and individual voice by writing. More correctly, I wanted to be a singer, to sing in counterpoint to the harshnesses of life. Harshness of all was my own singing voice and thus a frustrated singer became a journalist, although I have ALWAYS found writing difficult and tedious. But it helped me to find my own voice, with its exhorts, echoes and ecstasies. For that I am grateful.

Voices: The Sunday Tribune journalist who rang me was looking for a ticket for the 1984 All Ireland Football Final: "I was told my best bet was to look for a ticket in a county" - pauses and laughs - "like Leitrim". Too, I pause and laugh. I'm not from Leitrim either. But if my life depended on convincing colleagues and friends of that fact, then my life would be a lost cause.

Voices: Leitrim is not a lost cause. Even at a hundred miles and several years distant there is a continuous sense of censure from Drumshanbo's Joe Mooney for accepting the county as anything less than a corner of the Garden of Paradise. "And you know ..it is", Mooney would say breaking into

Cosgrave-Corish Coalition era. Months later, the scalpels were substituted for daggers drawn on the Coalition: "*Conor Cruise O'Brien is the greatest Irish disaster since the Titanic left the Belfast shipyards...*" It seems a funny sentence now, but it was written in a climate charged with ministerial menace. Later, I would learn that this sentence clinched the first of my two Young Journalist of the Year Awards

The irreverence was always there in my writing. Once we received a poem for "Poets Corner" which started off in a meandering come-all-ye style: "*O Do Not Love Too Long ...*". Deciding that this was written by an idiot, I promptly touched it up for publication ... only to receive a letter from a teenager in Drumkeerin suggesting that something approximating to what I had just published was to be found in the collected poems of *W.B. YEATS!* The teenager, *Vincent Woods*, has gone on to forge a good career for himself in broadcast journalism with RTE.

Voices: my own favourite story in Leitrim relates back to a phenomenon in vogue when I first arrived here in 1974. Then there was a distinct emphasis on regarding "North" and "South" Leitrim as separate entities, as if they were the two continents of America. Question Time competitions organised by the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association (PTAA) were very much in vogue then, too. One night, *Tommy Moran* travelled to one of

these competitions in a North Leitrim hall. The half-time rush is on for the toilets when the local, who doesn't know *Tommy Moran*, meets him there and politely inquires: "...and where are ye from, yourself'?"

"*Ballinamore*", came the cryptic reply of a man busily getting on with the business in hand.

The local turns the head sharply, as if stung: "*Good God! A-L-L the way down from South Leitrim tonight are ye?*"

It was as if the Ballinamore man had just completed an antipodean expedition from the Arctic to the Antarctic on hands and knees over a lifetime instead of driving across Lough Allen on less than a gallon of petrol in one night.

It equally raised visions of having to forge a passage through Ceannabo country by splitting the *Sliabh an Iarainn* rocks with vinegar in the style of Hannibal. My journalism career has often seemed to resemble Hannibal's plight in that respect; at times, I have been surrounded by people who are "*elephants*". Cheers!