

A comedown for Charlie

THIS time last year it seemed a dream overseas posting for a man like Charlie Bird. He had just taken up his prestigious appointment as RTE's Washington Correspondent in the run-up to the heady days before President Obama's inauguration. He would be there when the most charismatic and most quotable of presidents since Kennedy stepped out to lead America, a magical time of hope and promise for a new Camelot, a unique and lofty occasion when the eyes of the entire world would be focussed on 'DC', and Charlie was at hand at a time when honeyed words and sugary phrases were again all the fashion. Except, for Charlie Bird, that's not how it was at all.

His RTE predecessor in Washington, Robert Shortt, had alerted him to some of the pitfalls and Charlie was quickly to appreciate the truth of what he had been told. I always thought Shortt hit the Washington nail on the head some years earlier when he jibed "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog". In the first part of the two-part *Charlie Bird's American Year*, poor Charlie had no dog. Neither has he the consolation of a successful year because his overseas stint to date has been less than inspiring and has prompted little other than the tongue-in-cheek query "Has anyone seen Charlie?"

All of which is amazing when



PAT HOWLEY'S TV COMMENT

one recalls that the likeable Charlie had been the RTE star of the show during his years in Montrose. Now "a Washington nobody" — his own description — he had been a big fish in Dublin where he knew everybody and could come up with a newsworthy quote from anyone merely by lifting a phone. He had broken some of the biggest stories of the Troubles, with George Lee he had reported on the National Irish Bank offshore accounts story and had been central to Beverly Flynn's failed libel action against RTE. And now in Washington, his career has gone pear-shaped but, to his credit, he is offering some insight into the reasons why.

On his appointment he had been optimistic and was quoted as looking forward to seeing how America would like him, and vice versa. He had barely arrived when he began to have misgivings and as Robert Shortt was showing him around RTE's surprisingly grotty Washington office, Charlie became aware that he would be living and working in a city in which he didn't know a soul. As the year wore on he became miserable and lonely and it was the loneliness, especially at weekends, that really got to him.

I felt sorry for Charlie on Monday night, on his own in a city with the reputation of being one of the most impersonal in the world, and he has come to hate the place. As he said, he was mad to take on the American job and, obviously, has bitten off more than he could chew. He's a home bird and the Montrose roost was never as attractive.

Now pushing 60, he feels he was too old for the job and never seems to have fully embraced his new responsibilities. From being a media darling in Dublin, it bothered him that in the US nobody gave a "flying fiddler" who he was. By his own admission, he has struggled to cope but that has been obvious to viewers for months.

With little or no backup, he did his best but failed to get an interview with President Obama on the occasion of the visit by Taoiseach Brian Cowen for St Patrick's Day. He succeeded in getting into the Oval Office as part of the media posse but apart from a shouted question, which he was to discover is not the done thing in the First Residence, he got nothing.

It was even worse when, at a glittering Washington function, he

tried to get an interview with Dan Rooney, the new US Ambassador to Ireland but couldn't find him in the crowd as Charlie didn't know what Mr Rooney looked like. When some official or other eventually made contact with the ambassador, the word that came back to Charlie was a polite but adamant refusal, and that was that.

His only real break throughout the entire year came with a phone call from the State Dept that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was prepared to give him an interview and the news was a great boost. Strangely, nothing from the interview was included on Monday's documentary despite Charlie thinking he had turned the Washington corner, only he hadn't.

Isn't it all a far cry from the success of one of Charlie's predecessors, Carole Coleman, in the Washington job? Her one-to-one interview in the library of the White House with President George W Bush on the eve of his 2004 visit to Ireland was a special coup. She began by asking Bush did it bother him that the Irish people did not want to see him because of the unpopularity of the war in Iraq and the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Bush didn't like Coleman's line of questioning one little bit, but she continued with queries as to his reasons for invading Iraq when it was subsequently discovered that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction after all. The Coleman/Bush interview put RTE

on the international map but there seems little chance of poor Charlie ever managing something similar.

In the course of the year, Charlie received permission to visit Guantanamo Bay in Cuba but he wasn't allowed to film anything of significance, not even the sea, and no matter how he framed his questions, nobody would tell him anything. He did better when he travelled to a small town in West Virginia to meet Lynndie England, a soldier involved in the previously mentioned Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse who was given a two-year jail term and a dishonourable discharge from the army. She didn't want to meet Charlie in the trailer park where she now lives.

The measure of her unpopularity became evident when Charlie and Lynndie were thrown out of the restaurant in which they were conducting the interview and they had little choice other than to continue their chat in Charlie's car. She receives nothing from the army and nothing from anywhere else either and in a State where the ownership of a gun is the most coveted of rights — as Charlie discovered when talking to some of the locals — Lynndie's only regret is that she can never again do so.

There's another part of Charlie's programme still to come, probably next Monday, and the Lynndie England piece was the best of what Charlie had to offer this week. From his year in America, wasn't it a poor enough return?

OMNIBUS

A WEEKLY MISCELLANY

A french woman in Czarist Russia

THE Tribes of Galway were a varied lot. Of the 14, some have disappeared completely — when did you last meet an Athy or a Font? Others, like the Lynchs and the Blakes, propagated themselves around the county and the world.

And then there were the frenches. They, like the Blakes, cropped up in several locations around the county, one of the most significant being the village of Monivea.

Every so often you'll hear the claim that Monivea has the widest street in Europe. It doesn't really stand up, because what divides one side of Monivea from the other is a more a lawn, intersected by roadways.

This was originally laid out by the local landlord, a french whose name escapes me just now, but who wanted to improve the value of his estate and the lot of his tenants by establishing a linen industry. The greens were to be used to bleach the material.

That is part of the legacy left to Monivea by the frenchs. Another is the Norman tower, all that remains of the big house. And there is the mausoleum, hidden in the woods, which contains the mortal remains of the last two generations of the family.

That peculiar stone building, built to resemble a keep, is usually under lock and key. But in a couple of weeks' time, on Sunday February 7, it will be open to visitors to mark a very significant event.

This is the launch of a book which looks to have all the hallmarks of a fascinating read.

An Irish Woman in Czarist Russia is the story of Kathleen french, daughter of Robert Percy french of Monivea Castle and Sophie Alexandrovna Kindiakova of Simbirsk on the banks of the mighty Volga. (Simbirsk is now named Ulyanovsk in memory of its most famous son, Vladimir Ulyanov, alias Lenin.)

Robert Percy was a diplomat in the British foreign service and Sophie was from an old landowning family which had served in the Czar's armies for generations. Although they did not know it, they were among the last of their class to enjoy the luxuries and privileges of the gentry, and their daughter was to see the Bolsheviks confiscate her Russian estates.

Born in 1864, Kathleen enjoyed a childhood of riding about the family lands seated in front of her grandfather on his horse. She travelled Europe with her mother, whose behaviour was becoming more and more erratic, and at her father's bidding she visited Monivea, with which she fell in love, writing to her Russian grandparents "I am still entranced with Monivea, and think I could quite happily spend my whole life there".

She did not, of course, and she ended her days in Harbin, China in 1938, having lost almost everything she had once owned. But there was enough money to have her body shipped back to Ireland to lie in the mausoleum she had had built in 1896 to house her father's coffin. And this is what will be open for a few hours on February 7.

The story of how Kathleen's biography came to be written began in the Guinness brewery in Dublin. That is where the young Jean McMurtry met her husband to be, John Lombard. The couple ended up in Australia, where John worked as a journalist for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). They spent three years in South East Asia when John was correspondent there, and then went on to Moscow in 1988, just when the Soviet Union was beginning to open up under Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*.

Before arriving in Moscow they spent a few weeks in Dublin where John's mother, a cousin of Kathleen french, mentioned letters she written to her Irish relatives during the Russian Revolution.

Jean brought the letters to Moscow, and eventually she and a journalist friend, Masha Kiseleva, went to Ulyanovsk to see if they could find out any more about Kathleen french.

They found a treasure trove of letters and records, and from this grew the book which looks as though it will be a cracker. There are tales of imprisonment by the Bolsheviks, months driving through Siberia and Mongolia in search of her missing lover, and the building of that extraordinary mausoleum. Jean and John Lombard will be in Monivea for the launch in the Fr Sammon Centre, and I look forward to meeting them there.

— David Burke



AUTHOR Jean Lombard.



The Odd Couple gets a woman's touch

THE Neil Simon classic comedy *The Odd Couple* will be seen in a female version this weekend.

Abbeyknockmoy's drama group Abbey Acts are busy in final rehearsals for the comedy made famous by the hit movie with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau.

The ladies' version of the play carries the comedy of the mismatched roommates to a whole new level.

Newly separated from her husband, obsessive compulsive Florence Unger decides to move into the home of divorcee Olive Madison, currently enjoying the slovenly life of a single female. When their worlds collide, the story explodes in this laugh-out-loud comedy.

Judging from the group's inaugural production of the hilarious farce *June Groom* a mere seven months ago, a wonderful night of entertainment is guaranteed. This time, a whole new set of faces takes to the stage with many of the Abbey Acts summer performers working behind the scenes.

So, if you want to escape from the winter blues and have a guaranteed night of laughter why not come along.

The Odd Couple plays Friday January 29 and Saturday 30 in Abbeyknockmoy Community Centre, at 8.30 pm. Tickets are available from O'Donoghue's Spar, Abbeyknockmoy, The Woodside Bar, Monivea, and at the door on the night. *Photos on Page 6.*

Bizarre, noisy bands for Tuam

THIS Friday night at the Woolstore in Browne's of Tuam four of the most bizarre, noisy, interesting and fun groups currently going get together.

Headlined by Tuam's own So



BRIAN Kelly of So Cow — in Browne's Woolstore in Tuam.

Cow, performing in their home town for the first time as a full band, the night also features performances by local power-pop

THE HERALD ARTS NOTES

sensations The Ralphs, Donegal's punk rock titans Rural Savage and the grindcore insanity of Claregalway's Bahfiddle.

So Cow will play selections from last year's debut LP *So Cow* as well as tunes from forthcoming LP *Meaningless Friendly*. The three-piece plan shows for North America and Europe later in the year. Entry is €5 and the first band starts at 9.30 sharp.

Youth Orchestra concert

GALWAY Youth Orchestra will give its first concert of the decade in the Black Box Theatre, Galway on Saturday, January 30 at 8 pm.

The concert will include performances by the Junior, Intermediate and Senior orchestras under the direction of their conductors Michael Dooley, Joanne Cater and Peter Berrill.

This will be Peter Berrill's first concert conducting the GYO Juniors. Peter, from Headford, like his fellow conductors is well known in music circles in Co Galway having been music director in many theatre productions.

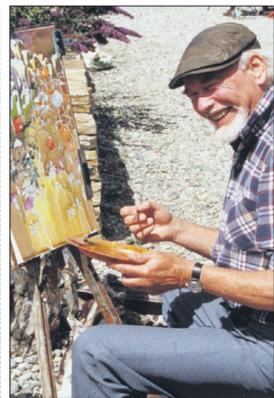
GYO Seniors will play in the Irish Aviation Authority Festival of Youth Orchestras in the National Concert Hall in Dublin on Saturday February 13 and the audience in the Black Box will have an opportunity to hear their rendition of Smetena's beautiful piece from *Ma Vlast the Moldau* which is part of their NCH programme.

The recently shown RTE series about the music programmes in St. Agnes' and St. Ultan's Primary Schools in Dublin shows the value of instrumental teaching and orchestral playing in the development of young people. Galway Youth Orchestra has been central in the provision of music playing opportunities for young people from both city and county for almost 28 years and this concert will give their audience a chance to see young players at their best.

Kenneth Webb paints at Kennys for charity

THE Kenny Gallery will host a series of art demonstrations in association with Cancer Care West throughout 2010.

The series will begin with a demonstration by artist Kenneth Webb on Saturday January 30 at 2 pm. Almost 60 years after he first sold a painting in Kenny's, the Kenny Gallery has the pleasure of offering this unique opportunity of



KENNETH Webb in Kennys.

seeing the master at work.

Other artists taking part in the series include Maria van Kampen, Jerry Marjoram, Jim McKee, Grace Cunningham and Ben Maile.

Commenting on the initiative, Conor Kenny of The Kenny Gallery said, "We have had a close association with Cancer Care West for many years now. We intend that this series is just the beginning of this sort of initiative on behalf of Cancer Care West. The calibre of artists we have gathered is superb and Kenneth Webb is the ultimate artist to set the scene for the programme."

Richard Flaherty of Cancer Care West expressed his appreciation to The Kenny Gallery. "We are hugely grateful for the support and interest shown by Kennys in the work we do here at Cancer Care West. We have been very lucky to have such wonderful artists contributing their expertise to our efforts."

There will be a limit of 110 tickets for each demonstration and all proceeds will go directly to Cancer Care West. The tickets are

on sale at €15 each. For booking and further information contact Cancer Care West on 091-545000 or visit www.cancercarewest.ie

NUIG's Hope for Haiti concert

SOME of Tuam's finest young talent will combine forces to raise funds for Goal's relief work in Haiti. The Conics and The Ralphs will play on Tuesday February 2 in the NUIG College Bar at 9 pm.

The Tuam bands will be joined by Gentleman's Get Together and comedian Stephan Bennet for what promises to be a great night. Tickets at the door, €5.

Sleep Furiously for one night at THT

SLEEP FURIOUSLY is a film, set in a small farming community in mid Wales, which explores a landscape and lifestyle strangely familiar to the Irish viewer.

The film, presented by Galway Film Society on Tuesday February 2 at 8.15 pm, takes us on a poetic and profound journey into a world of endings and beginnings, where old ways are rapidly disappearing, yet hope springs eternal.

"This film is pure cinema: visually alert, brilliantly musical, and moving in the way it captures time passing and lives lost" — Mark Cousins, author of *Imagining Reality and The Story of Film*.

Admission is €8/€6 (concession).

Tuam artist to show in Dublin

ARTIST JoJo Hynes, a stalwart of the Tuam Arts Festival, has a one-woman show in the Ivy House, 114 Upper Drumcondra Road, opening on February 11. More news next week.

Dark deeds in dastardly Dublin, and a nasty dose

WINTERLAND

By Alan Glynn
FABER & FABER €16

OH what a tangled web we weave... could have been a suitable sub-title to Alan Glynn's thriller *Winterland* which is set against a backdrop of shady political dealings, dodgy property deals and murder in noughties Dublin.

Hang on, don't turn off. It's not as bad as it sounds. In fact it's remarkably good. Quare goings on in Dublin have almost replaced those dreadful "one more killing in memory of Fr Seamus" style thriller which were one of the less attractive aspects of the Troubles.

The Peace dividend has thankfully been extended to thriller readers and many of the worst Troubles tat producers have been decommissioned, typewriters put beyond use with some of the worst offending authors morphing into politicians with no further need of book earnings.

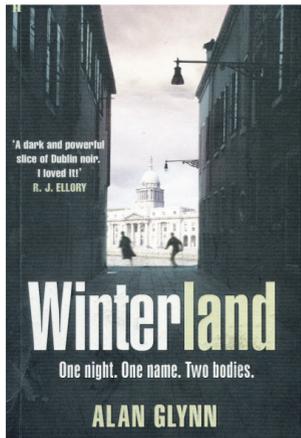
It's not giving the game away to say that the story begins when a Dublin hit man allows a lapse in quality control and takes out the wrong man. Right name, wrong man. Sure it could happen to any of us. But this still leaves the right man and why would anyone want to kill a harmless engineer working on Dublin's first mega skyscraper? Well may you ask.



TONY GALVIN'S BOOKSHELF

We don't get to find out for a while because the right man with the right name, Noel Rafferty, is found dead in a ditch soon after.

The first Noel Rafferty is not much of a loss to society but the second is to his



sister Gina who can't accept that it's coincidence that two members of her family named Noel (the toerag is a nephew), are killed on the one night.

At Noel toerag's funeral Gina meets his gang boss, The Electrician (don't ask), and starts the long and torturous road to find out what happened to her brother, and to a much lesser extent her nephew.

Fleshing out the plot is a major property developer, Paddy Norton, who's in cahoots with a man set to become the next Taoiseach. Naturally, both have all kinds of secrets they don't want out but how far are they willing to go to keep them in? Well, you may ask.

At this stage you either abandon the story or go with it and it's a fair reflection on the author's skill at baiting the lure that by the first few chapters I was in for the long haul.

Glynn has the ability to make those involved in high level skulduggery sound so ordinary but yet very believable. Developer Norton is addicted to pain killers and even with all his connections finds it difficult to get his prescription renewed.

The political intrigue is run-of-the-

mill debasement and the low lifes are simply that, not fiendishly clever megalomaniacs out to take over the universe.

Winterland worked for me. It tips along at a fair pace and even at its most outlandish it's believable which in this overloaded genre where authors compete for the limited attention span of jaded armchair psychopaths is high praise indeed.

THE BALLAD OF TRENCHMOUTH TAGGART

By Glenn Taylor
BLUE DOOR €15

A BALLAD, my dictionary tells me, is a narrative song with a recurrent refrain. *The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart* is an ear bending narrative and the recurrent refrain is the hard man for the hard road. When it comes to traditional storytelling, this is as good as it gets.

We first meet the hero of this ballad, Trenchmouth Taggart, when a journalist is sent to interview him as he's the oldest man in Virginia. He settles the young reporter down and warns him that the story he will hear may not be to his liking but it's the only one he has. And so it begins, like all great epics, at the beginning.

This simple literary device cuts away a lot of distracting explanation

and detail and paves the way for a good old-fashioned yarn about a man who lived life to the full for the century or more he's been on this earth.

Trenchmouth is named after the condition he suffers from. A deformity of the mouth and gums which renders his orifice a toxic and ugly gash. You probably know the condition as Vincent's stomatitis or acute necrotizing ulcerative gingivitis. OK, I googled it to see if it was real and it turns out it is and the trench mouth tag exists because it became common among soldiers in the trenches of the WWI — along with trench foot.

Abandoned by his natural mother, who saw him as the spawn of the devil and tried to drown him, he's saved and adopted by a widow who makes a living distilling superior moonshine in the hills of West Virginia. She also takes in another stray, a girl three years older than Trenchmouth.

Born in 1903, he comes of age at a time when coal miners are banding together in an effort to reform the medieval systems they're forced out of poverty to work under. This is Joe Hill territory and when the conflict becomes bloody Trenchmouth puts the

sniping skills he learned growing up in the woods to work on the side of the miners.

Naturally, this doesn't make him too popular with the authorities and the coal bosses so he goes to ground in the Appalachians for years.

He uses his apprenticeship as an outlaw to good used when he takes to the newspaper business. This is not as incongruous as it may seem as while his early years were difficult, having to suffer the torments of school mates and local wiseacres because of his condition, he had a remarkable relationship with his stepmother who appreciated the value of education and instilled in him a love of learning.

His wilderness years appealed to me most as the author has a feel for the

outdoor life and his admiration for the mountain man's lifestyle is in pleasant contrast to the traditional depiction of drooling, inbred hillbillies. I feared at first that this was going to develop into the tale of Forrest Gump's wayward brother but this character is far too tough, smart and world-weary to be taken for anyone's fool or to think life was a box of chocolates. This is a great read. Highly recommended.

