

An unforgettable introduction to the USA

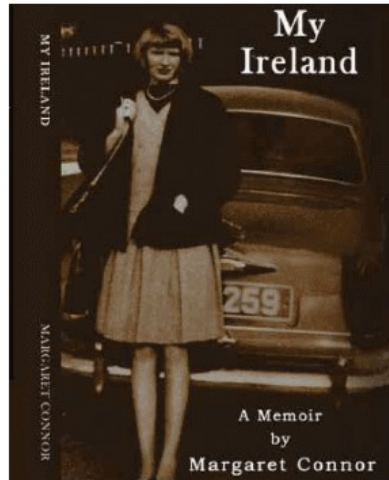
By Margaret Connor

Standing on the platform at Dublin Airport on that cold October morning in 1962, I said goodbye to my friend Finola before boarding Aer Lingus bound for America. It was my first time leaving Ireland.

Wearing a light grey coat and carrying a small red suitcase that contained all of my worldly possessions, I took a last look around my Ireland with a lump in my throat. The airline stewardesses greeted me warmly as they directed me towards my assigned seat.

This female crew, dressed in green skirted uniforms with matching caps, symbolised and promoted the airline positively with their perfect figures. Being an airline hostess with Aer Lingus was then considered prestigious, requiring a college education with language skills. Limited to single young women, I could never have qualified without the appropriate education but I could enjoy the service offered as experienced on that first flight.

Once seated inside the plane, I observed the interior walls decorated tastefully with green



Ballina native Margaret Connor has published a fascinating memoir about growing up on a small farm in the West of Ireland and later emigrating to the United States.

shamrocks. The theme was truly Irish with traditional music piped through the sound system, making me feel very comfortable. Following a hearty meal, I slept for many hours, waking up at the announcement to prepare for landing.

After touching down at Idlewild Airport, later renamed JFK, I passed through customs easily with my Irish passport, work permit and sponsorship documents. Proceeding to find my connecting flight to California, I heard my name

being paged over the intercom. This scared me as I was then alone in a foreign land. Who was calling, what had I done wrong, was I being deported as an illegal alien, I wondered.

I was already familiar with an intercom system

from my hotel experience but how or where to take the call was the concern. At least, I knew how phones worked. In the midst of the chaos and with the help of a staff member, I was led to the phone. Nervously picking up the receiver, I was pleasantly surprised and relieved to hear the voice of my cousin Eddie on the other end. He was then settled in Manhattan with his wife and family. I had written to him about my American plans. Eddie was apologetic for not being at the airport to greet me but I was very grateful for his welcome call.

My destination was for Fresno, California on that first American journey where my sister Francie was then living and working as a nurse. That meant finding my connecting flight for an additional six hours in the air.

Dazzled from all of the newness and activity around me, my eyes were drawn to a moving staircase, known as an escalator. I had never seen such before and learned that I had to climb it for my connecting flight.

Standing on the first step with the heels of my shoes over the edge to avoid getting stuck in the

grids, I held on for dear life. In Dublin, it was common for high heels to get caught in the street grids, ruining the heels and even breaking them off. God forbid that this should happen to me in New York. Getting off the escalator was scarier than getting on as I stumbled onto the floor. Lucky that I did not fall over and break my neck in my efforts to reach the Gold Coast.

This must have left me in a state of shock since the flight to California seemed uneventful. Arriving at Fresno Airport, I was met by Jim O'Brien and his wife. They looked so good to me, presenting an image of affluence. Jim had emigrated from Dublin and was then a vice president in the banking industry. He and his family had become close friends of my sister Francie in Fresno and I benefited from the relationship.

Taking my red suitcase, Jim and his wife led me to their sleek, streamlined automobile whose trunk was equally as long as the body. It was the longest automobile I had ever seen as I compared it to the small, mini cars in Ireland. I later learned that it was a Chevrolet and modelled after the jet

fighter planes.

Seated in the back seat of this wondrous vehicle, I stared out the window at the vast farms of fruits and vegetables as we drove through the San Joaquin Valley. Then I heard a whirring sound and looking up I saw a helicopter flying overhead. It was spraying the crops from above as it circled around. It was my first time seeing a helicopter but understood that it was used extensively in the military, yet here it was spraying crops. Stunned by the sights, I compared them to the small farms back at home and to the spraying machine, manually operated by its handle, that the farmers carried on their backs as they walked through the ridges spraying their few crops. What an introduction to America!

Automobile in America, Chromium steel in America.

Wire-spoke wheel in America.

Very big deal in America.

- West Side Story by Leonard Bernstein, 1956

* Ballina native Margaret Connor recently published her memoir, *My Ireland*. It is available to purchase in local bookshops and online.

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