

# MAIN INTERVIEW

# STORIES OF LEAVING AND COMING HOME

**SHELLEY MARSDEN** takes a look at a new book full of evocative images by Cork-born photographer David Creedon

**G**hosts of The Faithful Departed (The Collins Press) is a stunning new coffee table book of photographs by acclaimed photographer David Creedon.

It strikingly documents the isolation of rural Ireland through a series of emotionally powerful images whose beauty often lies in their desolation. As Creedon states in the book, often the houses he came across on his travels were crumbling and bare, save for religious pictures and statues which remained untouched.

Describing how the project came about, Creedon says: "I was never really sure whether I found The Ghosts of the Faithful Departed or if, in fact, they found me, but a few years



**In one house I found this thimble, an item usually found in every lady's sewing box. But here it has been abandoned, though it does not even look tarnished.**



**GHOSTS OF THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED**

DAVID CREEDON

ago I was sitting in the back seat of my friend's car as we drove through the back roads of County Sligo. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of an old house and for no reason I asked my friend to stop the car.

"As I walked back to the road I could see the house was deserted; the front door was open and it looked dilapidated. On entering the house, I could see that it was quite bare, the back door was also open and the house was obviously being used

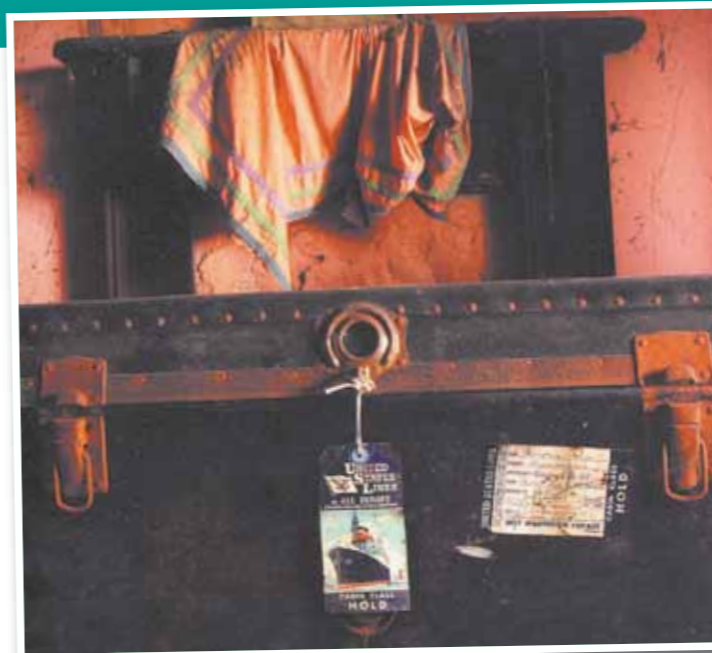
by sheep as a shelter, as was evident by droppings on the floor.

"I looked around although there was not much to see and, out of curiosity, I ventured upstairs and, when I walked into one of the bedrooms, the hair on my neck stood up at the sight in front of me; the room was painted a bright blue and, in the corner, there was an open wardrobe that contained a pink dress..."

Months later, the photographer was driving on an isolated road in Co Kerry,

and saw a house in the distance with the same look to it as the one in Sligo. He explored this one too, and found it was bare of furniture, except for an old piano in one of the rooms with an image of the Sacred Heart on a chair next to it.

A couple of days later, he spoke to a friend about these places, who said there was a house nearby that was just the same, and so the journey of discovery was set in motion, one that the photographer says was like discovering a whole set of



**Her trunk tells the story of emigration and return. The label states, 'Mary Sullivan, USS America, Aug 16 49, Pier 61, New York to Cobh, Cabin Class'**

The innate power of the images within this book relies, to a certain extent, on our expectation that inside a house, there are people and life. But as these spaces our empty, we begin to construct our own stories about the objects that have been left behind.

Dr Breda Gray, who wrote "Breaking the Silence - staying at home in an emigrant society", said of them: "The absence of people forces us, as viewers, to construct stories about the woman who wore the pink dress in the wardrobe, the returned emigrant and her trunk of 'goodies' from the US, the child in the pram and where he or she might be now, the desires, hopes, dreams and prayers that were directed at these religious pictures and statues. "We begin to think beyond the statistics and the public focus on male emigrants when the traces of emigration are relocated in the spaces

and artefacts of the home." Creedon's work has received international acclaim and is regularly published. He has previously exhibited in galleries and museums in New York, London, Chicago, Bucharest, Sarajevo, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Nicosia, Thessaloniki and Sofia, as well as in galleries throughout Ireland.

His work has been described 'as one of the most significant collections of photography in contemporary Ireland and will be amongst the most important works of Irish art in years to come', while another critic wrote, 'His photographs transcend the documentary form and enter the realm of art, they are poems in photographs'.

Creedon's work will soon be on show in London and across the UK, having been selected for the prestigious Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London. The exhibition will run from 10th November 2011 until 12 February 2012 before heading on tour around the UK.

**Ghosts of the Faithful Departed (£24.99/ £21.99, The Collins Press) is out now. Visit [www.collinspress.ie](http://www.collinspress.ie) or call 00353 21 4347717 for more.**

different stories, and made him reflect on the young men and women who were forced to up sticks and leave, travelling on cattle boats and living in doss houses, working as navvies on the roads, building sites, so their families back home could survive. But what happened to them?

Emigration has been a constant in Ireland since the Famine. Those left behind by family and friends suffered hardship and isolation and passed away, their homes monuments to a bygone age.

Creedon's images are a symbol of the experiences of the rural dwelling Irish in the twentieth century that were perhaps overlooked and to a certain extent unacknowledged, remaining at home while friends and family members left for the Irish cities, England, America and elsewhere.

Visiting these unoccupied houses, David Creedon says he felt like an intruder disturbing the spirits that haunt every room. "In some, it seemed the last activity was waking the dead, closing the door and leaving the house to the ravages of time. Sometimes the last occupancy could be dated by a newspaper or calendar".

Looking at such scenes awoke ghosts from the photographer's own past. Memories flooded back, prompted by dusty newspapers or mouldy-framed images. Wallpaper evoked his parents' holiday home, a valve radio the thrill of tuning into Luxembourg or Prague.

Forsaken and forgotten, the houses acquire new life in these hauntingly evocative photographs, the rich colours within the houses in contrast with the poverty of the last occupants. In our busy, speeded up world, the images transmit a sense of time standing still.

The book is interesting on many levels, as not only does it contain a host of

wonderfully potent colour images, but each image is also accompanied by a description and thoughts from the photographer about each discovery.

Creedon was unable to uncover a story from the objects in every house, but in some cases he was able to piece together people's lives from letters that were scattered about, and from examining the Census records and Ellis Island immigrants' database.

**This house was being used as a shelter for cattle... I discovered this old battered piano in one of the downstairs rooms.**



**An old pram lies next to a picture of the Saviour. The house is empty now and the laughter and cries of the children are long gone.**