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**IRELAND**

# noir

## Immaterial world

Inside Ireland's original ghost estates **P14**





Haunting images of empty houses in a new book evoke an era of emigration, offering parallels with today, writes Siobhán Maguire

**O**n October 11 1930, Mary O'Sullivan, a young Cork woman, gathered what few belongings she had and set sail for New York. Boarding the White Star liner RMS Cedric at Queenstown — now Cobh — she hoped, like many of her fellow passengers, that the views that receded until they blended in with the watery horizon, would not be her last glimpse of Ireland. O'Sullivan, who travelled steerage and had just \$15 (€11) when she landed in Ellis Island, wondered what America, the land of dreams, held in store. Fast-forward 19 years, and O'Sullivan is back Ireland in her native Cork. The return journey in 1949 was far more comfortable. O'Sullivan sailed "cabin class hold", neither first class nor a lowly tourist class, and dined on caviar and wild Irish smoked salmon. She had done well in America. A crumpled bank book shows savings of more than \$8,000, a fortune in those days.

What O'Sullivan did during her two decades in America is a mystery. Indeed, there is no record of her childhood and teenage years. There are photographs that capture her last days, and among her belongings are mementos from her time abroad: an American flag with 48 stars, which dates from between 1912 and 1959; a dress hanging on a wall hook, a sea of green contrasting sharply with the colours of the faded flag; and a trunk full of secrets, from her bank book to nylon stockings still in their original packaging.

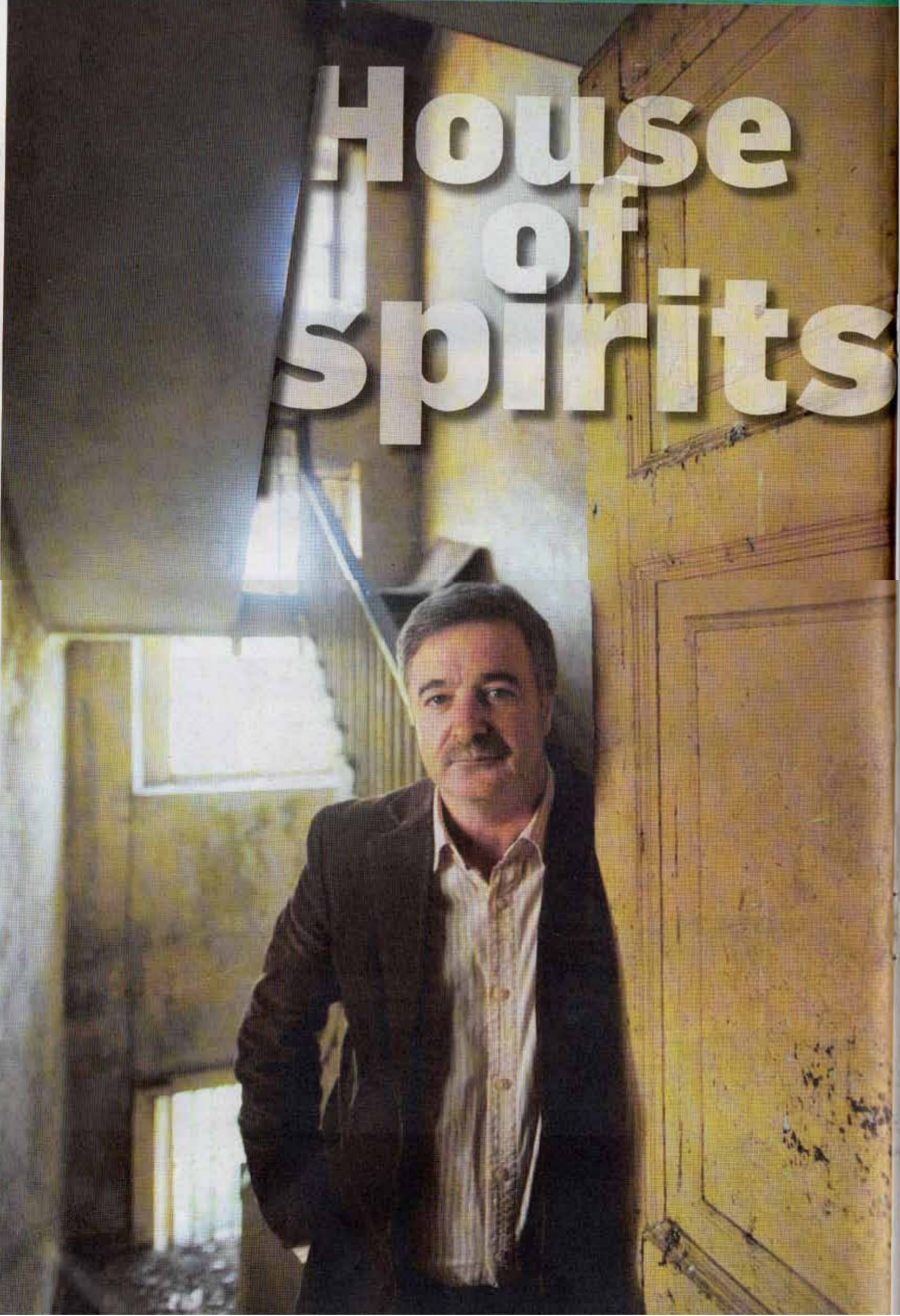
O'Sullivan's spirit lives on today, thanks to the work of David Creedon, a Cork photographer, who, since 2005, has been capturing glimpses into the lives of those who were forced to emigrate in search of work and left abandoned homes behind them.

Creedon, whose work is about to be published in a book, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, photographed the decaying, empty homes that litter the countryside — Ireland's original ghost estates. Creedon's collection parallels an Ireland of today, where there is emigration, unemployment, rural isolation and almost 19,000 empty new homes across the landscape.

The irony is not lost on the artist, especially when he considers that most of his photographs were taken at the height of the Celtic boom, a time when abandoned homes were seen less as monuments to a bygone age than as ramshackle buildings cluttering up prime development land.

"Photographing these homes, I felt like there was a story behind each one," says the photographer, who is in his fifties. "These young men and women of de Valera's Ireland had no option but to emigrate. Leaving home at 16 or 17, they travelled on cattle boats and lived in dosshouses. They worked as navvies on the roads and the building sites, sending money home when they could, so that their families could survive and, by doing so, took a burden off the state. Some became the vanishing Irish and today they are old, living alone, forgotten and in poverty."

# House of spirits



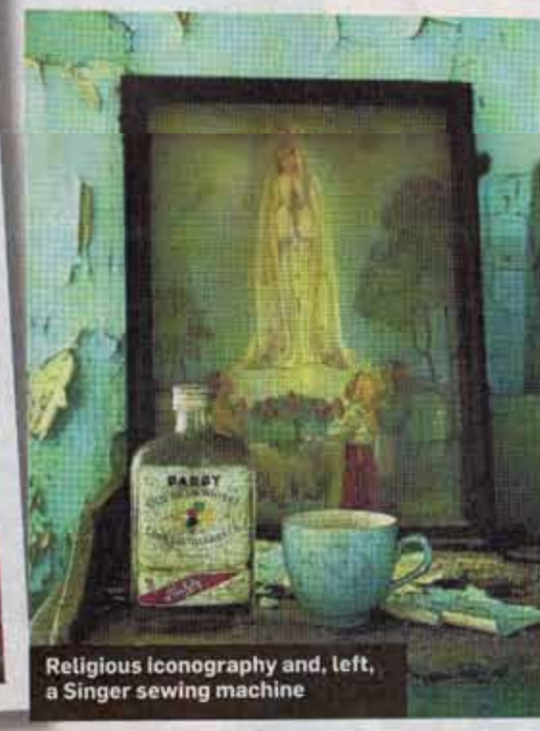
Bright colours on the walls contrast with the drabness of poverty



An abandoned coach-built pram stands on a floor through which weeds are grow



Religious iconography and, left, a Singer sewing machine



**"IT WAS A TUMBLDOWN HOUSE AND OVERGROWN WITH WEEDS, BUT WHAT I SAW MADE THE HAIR ON MY NECK STAND ON END"**

set about snapping as many isolated properties as he could find. In the years that followed — the spoilt and selfish years of the Celtic tiger — Creedon's photographs were exhibited in galleries and museums in New York, London, Chicago, Bucharest, Sarajevo, Georgia, Armenia, Cyprus, Greece and Bulgaria, as well as in galleries in Ireland.

While there are social and political similarities between the ghost estates of old and their modern-day versions, Creedon's photos, which are shot in colour, also juxtapose the rich colours within the houses with the poverty of the last occupants.

Peeling paint in turquoise and vermilion adorns walls decorated in religious iconography, from the familiar Sacred Heart red light, to framed tributes to the pontiff of the time and chipped statues on mantelpieces, makeshift altars in an era when Ireland revered the Catholic church.

His photographs offer a rich and haunting record of the time, an era when boot soles were fitted with horse shoes to minimise wear and tear.

They detail dust-covered interiors and, in dilapidated outhouses, rusting cars, motorcycles, bicycles and tractors. Cobwebbed possessions collar moments in time: a chipped cup sitting on a stainless-steel counter; a badger-hair shaving brush on a windowsill beside an old-style razor and clothes hanging in wardrobes.

A 1916 Declaration of Independence picture takes pride of place in one home, alongside an array of black-and-white photographs of a family lone forgotten.

ished memories in the form of photos or jewels, and Singer sewing machines are among the forsaken items. While Creedon was not always able to piece together a story on the occupants, as he managed to do with O'Sullivan, he did salvage information where he could: letters, census records and the Ellis Island immigrants' database. Some stories fell into his palms, such as that of Linda Keohane, an artist from Co Galway.

Included in the book is her story of an ordinary summer afternoon on her aunt's farm in Clooneygorman, in west Cork, that turns out to be an extraordinary day for the world. Accompanying a picture of the farm, is Keohane's description of a day spent saving hay that is rich in colloquial language and captures her father's mannerisms, the heavily brogued speech of the locals and the work ethics of old against a backdrop of the first moon landing on July 21, 1969.

Creedon is the first to admit that his subject matter is not the cheeriest, and that spending so much time photographing homes redolent of sadness was not good for the soul. In one old room, he felt "a presence". "Looking at the bed and the indentation on the pillow, I got the feeling that somebody had passed away here," he says. "The chest of drawers had been turned into an altar with candlesticks and a cross."

In another property, which was in a tumbledown state, he found a room overrun with rats. Thinking the house was empty, he looked into another room and found an old man sitting on a bed. Distraught and appalled by the old man's living conditions, Creedon contacted a district nurse who promised to check on the man. He never found out what happened.

"There came a time when I knew to stop," he says. "You have to respect these places; homes belonging to somebody else. But you also have to respect the fact that they survived so much, decades of emigration, loss, and the craziest building frenzy this country has ever seen."

worse off today. Back then, people weren't saddled with massive mortgages.

"I feel so sorry for young people in this country. The wheel of emigration is turning again and once more we are losing so many to Australia, Canada and America."

Creedon's journey into Ireland's unoccupied homes, many of which were left to decay by owners who were forced out of the country in the 1950s and 1980s, began on an overcast day in March, 2005. A passenger in a friend's car that was weaving its way through the backroads of Co Sligo, Creedon saw an old house and felt compelled to stop and have a look.

"It was a two-storey farmhouse with the front door wide open and sheep living downstairs," he says. "I knew it was abandoned, but there was something about it. I had to explore."

Making his way upstairs, Creedon pushed open a door and found himself in a room filled with somebody else's memories. "I'll never forget it. Inside was a blue-walled room and an old wardrobe



Creedon's photographs capture moments in time

made the hair on my neck stand on end. I took my photos and left, careful to make sure I didn't upset or disturb anything."

Creedon thought nothing of the photographs until the following August when, driving around Co Kerry, he came across a similar place, but this time

an old piano and a crumpled Sacred Heart picture on a chair. I reached for my camera.

It wasn't until January, 2006, that Creedon's work took on a life of its own. After leaving the Sligo and Kerry photos at the printers, he was contacted by a woman asking if she could exhibit his