

Editor: Róisín Ingle
features@irishtimes.com
Phone: 01-6758000

Tomorrow
A new dreamcoat: behind the scenes with Joseph and co

Matters of life, death and Dublin undertaking

Rosita Boland

A book marking 200 years of the Nichols family and their undertaking business isn't all serious

Every culture manages the ritual of death differently, but what is common to all is the wish for solemnity and dignity in the final goodbye.

Undertakers have a unique role in society. They are the buffer between grieving families and the practicalities of death. They are entrusted to manage a hugely significant event in people's lives, and they only have one chance to get everything right.

It is therefore no surprise that many undertaking companies are family-run operations, such as the Dublin-based Corrigans and Masseys. Trust is their currency, built up over generations.

The Nichols family have been in business in Dublin for six generations. Their 200th anniversary is this year. To mark this, they have published a book, *Past Nichols, The Undertakers*.

This liberally illustrated book is rich in Dublin social history. It starts with horses, which pulled hearses back in pre-automobile days.

It is fascinating to be reminded just how many horses lived in Georgian Dublin, and how stables in the city centre were once as common as garages would later become. Horses remained part of the Nichols's business for 134 years, up until 1948.

One of the vehicles the Nichols family used for business was a black saloon, previously owned by archbishop John Charles McQuaid. Such was the fearsome reputation of the archbishop that people continued to genuflect at the car after the undertakers had bought it, thinking that it contained the notorious archbishop.

Coffin Street

Cook Street, off the south Quays, was once known as Coffin Street. In 1836, there were 16 coffin-makers there,



Top, the vault at St Michan's Church, Dublin, the renovation of which was organised and paid for by Dick Nichols in 1940. Above, Gus Nichols, head of the business, in the coffin loft

with coffins on display outside the workshops. People would go directly to the makers to choose one. The book tells us that nobody stole them, because they were "unpawmable".

In later years, the Nichols family expanded the business and carried out funerals for "Anglo-Irish titled families, all around Leinster and farther afield". These families provided wood from their own estates to make the coffins.

In the 1940s, funerals were staggeringly expensive, costing "the equivalent of 20 weeks' wages", which must have caused hardship to many.

Today, according to the book, more than 10 per cent of all funerals in Ireland are cremations, whereas in Dublin cremations account for 30 per cent of funerals.

Black humour

We get some glimpses of the humour undertakers have in order to deal with the dreadful challenges of the job, such as burying children.

“In the 1940s, funerals were staggeringly expensive, costing ‘the equivalent of 20 weeks’ wages’”

Gus Nichols, the present head of the family business, recounts how he once lost a birthday present. He was driving a priest to a graveside to give the prayers. Before he exited the car, the priest took what he thought was a bottle of holy water to pour into the grave. It wasn't holy water, however, it was very expensive aftershave, which Nichols had just been given by his sister.

There is one particularly arresting photo in the book of a row of suited people standing behind a coffin at a 2011 convention of undertakers in Chicago and smiling widely. The caption reads: "The casket was used as a prop at the annual memorial service for deceased members." It's hard to know where to begin with the use of a coffin as a prop, but at least it appears there was nobody in it.

Past Nichols The Undertakers: Six Generations of a Dublin Family Business 1814-2014 is out now



Speed painting: one hour to capture a person's essence

For *Sitting*, his latest exhibition, Nick Miller has undertaken a marathon as he paints five portraits per day, with just one hour for each

Ann Marie Hourihane

It is a bit of a privilege to watch someone painting. To see the artist Nick Miller start a portrait with two banana-like shapes in a flesh colour, and find out that this is the head, that the eyes and the forehead go in above them, the nose and mouth in between. But that is later on. Miller most commonly starts his portraits from the bottom.

After the two banana shapes, he begins his portrait of Sheelagh Coyle from her shoulders and from the pattern of her sleeveless top. Later on he starts his portrait of Bernadette Dunphy from her converse shoes. "I like your shoes," he says. But that is unusual, and hers is the only full-length portrait thus far. She is so delicate, sitting on a chair like a Degas; the other 14 of us are head-and-shoulder types.

Towards the end of each portrait, Miller walks to a round mirror, which is placed diagonally to the sitter. What is he checking? "It's more to do with whether it looks like a painting," he says. "Whether for me it has the qualities of a painting. Which is sort of strange... unquantifiable."

These things are said not to the reporter but to the sitters, to reassure them and chivy them to the finish line. "Not too long. Not too long now," he says. He sounds like a doctor or a dentist. "Five more minutes." He is calm and good-humoured amid the slamming doors, the sound of the ice-cream van, the heat in the studio.

"I'm sort of experimenting with what's possible," he says. "People these days can't sit for hours and hours."

In Brooklyn, New York, Miller painted 40 portraits in as many days. "I had three hours with each person. I painted a watercolour and an oil painting for each person.

Stealing a New Yorker's time is like stealing the crown jewels."

Here we are at Laois Arthouse in Strabally. The time has got even shorter, and the watercolour paint is going on quite thick. Miller is painting five portraits per day, not counting those of media types who barge in, and he is fulfilling the commissions for two oil portraits of local artists, the sculptor Cathy Carmen and the poet Pat Boran. In fact, as Miller speaks, Boran is drying outside.

Each watercolour is scheduled to take an hour. "It's amazing how different each hour is," Miller says to Coyle, a retired teacher who now writes.

Miller is working in one of the artists' studios at the Laois Arthouse in Strabally, which is in a converted courthouse. He is sleeping in his artists' apartments.

The front of the building houses the library, where this afternoon small children are buzzing around on a summer project while their mothers chat. The rest of the complex has a simple wall around it. "I'm my own jailer," he says.

Very public mistakes

He is experimenting with the process, he says. His primary interest is not in perfection, but in the encounter. It takes a confident person to be prepared to make their mistakes in public, but this experiment is more than that: it is a marathon.

The marathon has been arranged by Muireann Ni Chonail, the arts officer of Co Laois. She knew about the Brooklyn project and had admired Miller for years. In 2008 she met him at his home in Sligo.

In 2011 she took over the management of Laois Arthouse, which opened that year. She established a link to the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which lent three of Miller's works from the 1990s, including a beautiful portrait of his wife, Noreen, which is displayed in the tiny gallery of the Arthouse. There was also a public interview with the artist, conducted by Christina Kennedy of Imma.

The project is called *Sitting*, and was achieved for €18,000. "I don't mind if you print that figure," says Ni Chonail. It came from the Per Cent for Art scheme - funded by the 1 per cent levy on the building of capital projects, back in the good times - and Laois County Council.

Unusually imaginative

Sitting is an unusually imaginative event for one of our many beautiful and frequently deserted arts centres. The people of the midlands flocked to have their portraits painted after the opportunity was advertised in local papers.

"People were advised that there was going to be no photorealism, and that the portraits would not be a vanity project for anyone," says Ni Chonail. "There was a long waiting list."

Bernadette Dunphy is 25 and has a master's degree in musicology. She is on a JobBridge scheme in the public libraries of Sligo and Tubbercurry.

“He is experimenting with the process, he says. His primary interest is not in perfection, but in the encounter”

Miller and Dunphy talk about Laois and Sligo. He is worried that today she is being subjected to a lot more media attention than one person can stand. Behind him is Lisa Finnegan, a documentary maker who is recording the whole project; the photographer Dylan Vaughan, whose father, George Vaughan, is an artist known to Miller; me, writing everything down and staring; two still cameras; and one video camera.

When each portrait is complete, Miller takes a photo of it and of the sitter with his own camera. Dunphy is wearing a little pendant in the shape of a camera. "I wasn't expecting so many people," she says, look-

ing out at us. "It's just so funny, the whole thing." She is from Ballinakill, about half an hour away.

"Put it down to experience," says Miller. "The painting's going all right so far. Miraculously."

He has already done the shoes, Dunphy's jeans, which he has made slightly greenish, and the red chair. Now he is moving on to the cream cardigan and the white vest.

Coming together

"Settle where your head will be," he says. "If you feel like you have to move, it's okay." The long streak of her dark hair goes in before her face, linking her shoulder, chest and cardigan with the head.

When you look at us all, in our portraits pinned up so casually by the artist outside - no fuss about installation for him - you can see that it feels very good at the tilt of someone's head. He is very good at glasses, too; he wears glasses himself. He is standing now in front of Dunphy, with eight or 10 brushes in his left hand.

You can see how intense the work is. But when you're sitting for him you can't see that; it feels like leisurely. "Look the way you were looking," he says to her. He is almost finished.

He used to go round in a van and paint from it. He painted the journalist John Waters for a television programme.

After you have had your portrait done, you feel a bit peculiar. Looking at a painting of yourself, as opposed to a photo, is strange. But it's special in some indefinable way, as quite a lot of people in Laois and surrounding counties now know.

The exhibition of portraits completed during *Sitting*, Nick Miller's residency at Laois Arthouse, is in Strabally until September 1

