

Florence Donaldson

From Radio Eireann to President Nixon

by Frank Donaldson

My late mother Florence Donaldson (nee Davis) was a resident of Coolyduff, Inniscarra from 1980 to 2001, a period of twenty-one years.

Henry Samuel Davis my Grandfather was born on 15th August 1880, at 18 Park Place Islandbridge, Dublin, the year after his parents William Davis and Sarah Phoebe Elliott were married. To go back a little in time the UK Census of 1891 finds my Grandmother Annie Julia Windsor and her parent's living in Dover in the UK. The family moved to Dublin between 1895 and 1898. Annie married my Grandfather Henry Samuel Davis on 14th September 1909 in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Rathmines in Dublin.

At the time of their marriage in 1909, Annie was living in Rathmines, Dublin. Henry was living in Ranelagh and he was a Commercial Clerk. The Irish Census of 1911, finds Annie Julia and her husband Henry Samuel Davis living at 4 Dalkey Avenue. At that time, Annie was 29 years of age and Henry 30 and they were both Church of Ireland.

Dalkey, Co Dublin

The 1911 Census record records that one child was born to Henry and Annie, but no children were living. David William had been born on 6th July 1910 at *Summerville*, Dalkey Avenue, Dalkey Co Dublin. The cause of his death was convulsions. Henry's occupation is given in the 1911 Census as a Commercial Clerk and he was employed by the Dublin United Tramways Company. This baby was a brother to my late mother Florence Donaldson (nee Davis).

My mother Florence Alice Phoebe Davis was born at *Summerville*, Dalkey, on 10th August 1911. By at least Christmas 1920, Florence and her family had moved to 61 Botanic Avenue, just off Moibhi Road where she would later live. Henry and Annie Julie had a third child, a son Edward Henry known as Ted, who was my uncle. Ted was born on 14th April 1915 at 61 Botanic Avenue, Glasnevin, Dublin. Ted worked as a Commercial Traveller for Irish Ropes, the Newbridge based carpet maker. As a young boy, I still remember the small Irish Ropes notebooks that he gave me on a regular basis. In his later years, he ran Scully's Stores in Glasnevin with his wife Marie. I remember driving Ted's Vauxhall Viva to Wholesalers to buy supplies for resale in Scully's Stores. I liked that car and still remember that it had a great gearbox!

School

We know that Florence attended the Bertrand School in Dublin at 10 -11 Eccles Street, Dublin and was there in 1925, and until at least June 1928. On 25th May 1925 Florence won *The Royal Zoological Society of Ireland* (Essay Girls) Prize. This may have been for an essay about Swans. If the essay about the Swans is true, then it indicates her very early interest in wildlife and nature. Her Prize was a series of seven books, one of which was a book of Robert Browning poems which we have. That interest was to remain with her throughout her life. This interest was eventually to bring her botanical talent to the White House in America.

To America

Florence sailed on the *Queen Mary* from Southampton to New

York on 30th March 1938. Her Passport had been issued on 23rd and she was visiting her Aunts Doris and Florence. I recall my mother telling me how she managed to get seasick on that grand ship. Florence's Passport survives and this shows that she was admitted to the US on 4th April 1938. The crossing time for the Atlantic was therefore about four days. Her Passport shows that at that time Florence had brown eyes and brown hair and was 5'4" in height. Florence's Passport gives her profession as being a Civil Servant.

As I now know Florence was an enthusiastic collector of autographs. While on board *The Queen Mary* she managed to get the autograph of the ship's Commodore (Captain).

Florence at Radio Eireann

Before her marriage in October 1946 Florence enjoyed a highly successful career in Radio Eireann, now RTE. Florence worked in Radio Eireann on Henry Street, off O'Connell Street in Dublin from 1931 to 1946, therefore joining when she was 20 years of age. Florence was the Special Assistant to Captain Michael Bowles. He joined Radio Eireann in January 1941 as the first full-time Radio Eireann Director of Music. Michael Bowles was to become the first Conductor of the Radio Eireann Symphony Orchestra a post he held until his death in 1948.

Douglas Corrigan

On 18th July 1938 Douglas Corrigan landed his light aircraft at Baldonnel Aerodrome near Dublin, having flown the Atlantic from New York. He did not have formal permission to fly the Atlantic, and claimed that his intention was to fly from New York to Long Beach, California. His navigation was 180 degrees out; the flight had taken 28 hours. Radio Eireann obviously wished to interview Corrigan and Florence was asked to '*mind him*' during the interview because apparently, he was extremely nervous of the interview process.

Florence as a Singer

Florence was an accomplished Contralto and joined the Dublin based *Ivy Singers* and the following photograph is dated 1939-1940. I failed to find out any information about this group based on an internet search. Florence (with glasses) is seated in the front row second from right. The man on the extreme right of the second row with glasses, behind her, is her father Henry Samuel Davis.

Margaret Burke Sheridan was born in 1889, and was a Mayo born Contralto, who was to rise to international classical music importance. She came to dominate the music stages of London and Italy. She knew Puccini and had a love/hate relationship with Arturo Toscanini, the Director of La Scala, Milan where she became the leading Contralto. Margaret did a series of talks on her time in Italy, for Radio Eireann. These talks took place on Saturday nights, and Margaret specifically requested the presence of Florence in the studio during these talks. Florence had visited Sheridan on several occasions in Dublin and she had been given some music lessons by Sheridan.

In late 1942 Radio Eireann received a Supplementary Estimate from the Government in the amount of £3,862. Part of this additional funding was allocated to increasing the Radio Eireann



Florence (with glasses) on board the Queen Mary - 2nd from right

Orchestra from 28 to 40 members. A new initiative included in the above Government allocation, was the setting up of a *Radio Chorus* of 24 members. The Irish Times of 28th January 1943 announced that '*Tests will begin shortly for the new Radio Eireann Choir*'. Applications had already been invited. Successful applicants were to be paid a fee on a per engagement basis with a guaranteed minimum of 12 engagements in the year. Payment was advertised at £1.10.0 (about €50.00 today) per choral engagement and £2.0.0 per Operatic engagement. Sir Hugh Robertson director of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir came to Dublin to help Radio Eireann select the 24 Choir members. The choir was to be composed of 7 Contraltos, 6 Altos, 5 Tenors and 6 Bass.

There were between 300 and 400 applications received by Radio Eireann to join the Choir and 60 were called for interview. Florence was to compete for one of the seven Contralto places. Florence applied to join the Choir, and was called for interview for 10.12 am on Tuesday 4th May 1943. For the test, she was required to sing one song of her own choice, not exceeding 3 minutes in length, and a test piece at sight. On 31st May Florence was formally informed in writing by Radio Eireann, that she had *been declared successful in the recent tests* and was offered a place in the Choir. The Choir gave its first performance on Friday 25th June 1943, from Scots Church Hall under the direction of Sir Hugh Robertson, Director of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir.

Rhoda Coghill was the pianist for the Choir, and from 1939 to 1968 Rhoda was the official accompanist in Radio Eireann. She was a noted composer, and wrote at least one book of poetry and died in 2000. She became a good friend of my parents and as a young boy I remember meeting her. The Choir took part in many live broadcasts from Radio Eireann, and on several occasions Florence was a soloist

Before joining the Radio Eireann Choir Florence had been an Alto in the St Mary's Church Donnybrook, Dublin Choir. However, she had to resign from this on being offered the place in the Radio Eireann Choir.

Florence continued as a member of the Radio Eireann Choir until at least 10th June 1944 which is the date of the last broadcast details in her papers which we hold. On 11th June 1952, Florence was invited by Radio Eireann to become a full-time Choir member. My parents were living in Greystones at that time, and a full-time commitment to the Choir would not have been possible. Florence

replied on 13th June 1952 and the details of her reply to Radio Eireann were in shorthand. We are still trying to find someone who can translate for us!

Because of her role in Radio Eireann, as Personal Assistant to the Director of Music, Florence had ready access to many of the international musicians of note who came to Dublin in the period 1933 to 1938 to give public concerts, and to participate in Radio Eireann programmes. As I understand it, part of her work in Radio Eireann was to look after the international artists who came to Dublin. She kept an Autograph Book which still survives and we have in our possession. A summary of some of the more interesting autographs is given below.

Florence had a good friend in Charles Lynch the Irish pianist, who



premiered works by several important 20th century composers. He was instrumental in getting her the autograph of Benno Moiseiwitsch detailed above, the Ukraine born pianist. Florence also seems to have been a good friend of Vincent O'Brien in her Radio Eireann days and was a pupil of his. The following background is taken from the internet.

Florence was a regular contestant in the *Sligo Feis Cheoil* with some considerable success. We found a letter dating from May 1941 in Florence's papers from Vincent O'Brien in which Vincent O'Brien congratulates Florence on her 'further success in Sligo' and goes on to say 'You worked very earnestly and should wear your honours proudly'. From what I know Florence

From Hayes Hotel in Thurles Florence and Frank went to Glencar Hotel in County Kerry where they stayed for four days from 24th October, departing on 28th October, this stay cost £7.6s.0d. Florence and Frank had one child, and that was me, Francis Samuel Windsor Donaldson was born on 31st July 1947 in the Bon Secours Home in Tralee, Co Kerry.

At the time of my birth the family was living at Bridge Street, Cahirciveen. Later we moved a little further out of town to a house called *The Firs*. It no longer survives, as the house was demolished to make way for a Supermarket and associated facilities, probably around the year 2000. *The Firs* was a two-story detached house just outside Cahirciveen on the Waterville

Florence the Singer

An accomplished Contralto, Florence joined the Dublin based *Ivy Singers* and this photograph is dated 1939-1940. I failed to find out any information about this group based on an internet search. Florence (with glasses) is seated in the front row second from right. The man on the extreme right of the second row with glasses, behind her, is her father Henry Samuel Davis.



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Marriage

Florence Davis married Frank Lewis Donaldson, my father, in St Mobhi's Church in Glasnevin, Dublin on 23rd October 1946. At that time my father was a Civil Servant working for the Meteorological service. Following their wedding ceremony in St Mobhi's Church in Glasnevin the Reception we believe was held at Florence's parents' house at 87 Moibhi Road, Glasnevin.

The day after their wedding on 24th October Florence and Frank took the 10.15 am train from Kingsbridge (now Heuston Station) Station to Thurles, Co Offaly, using tickets 8727 and 8728. There they spent the second night of their Honeymoon; this cost £1.4.6.

side. This move probably took place in 1949 when I was two years of age.

Poetry Readings

In 1966 Frank and Florence began weekly poetry readings for visitors and locals at the *Bay View Hotel* in Waterville, Co Kerry where I worked in the summer. These readings usually took place in the period May to September. Sometimes I took part in these readings. One of the more notable readings was of extracts from *The Great Hunger* by Patrick Kavanagh, set for our three voices. However, some of the Kavanagh content was probably a little too advanced for the local Waterville and visitor audience in the late 1960s! On 22nd November 1968, the three of us gave a reading of

Patrick Kavanagh 's *Great Hunger* in the County Library in Clones, Co Monaghan. This followed on a lecture by Brendan Kennelly on *The Vision of Patrick Kavanagh*.

Florence and Frank had a great friend in Cahirciveen who was Jim Foley. He worked at O'Neill's Grocery shop on the Main Street near the Catholic Church. Florence often spoke of how kind Jim was to her. He helped her to choose food for the family, and then explained to her how to cook it! WE must remember that Florence came from a sheltered family background in Dublin, and had no experience of rural living. The Ration Books were frequently used in this shop. Jim who lived in Marian Place, Cahirciveen became a firm family friend and I recall his many visits to us at *The Firs* where we lived. In February of this year I was totally surprised to meet Jim Foley's son in The Anglers Rest in Carrigrohane. He had not seen me for a least fifty years!

I cannot remember the exact year when we left "The Firs" and Cahirciveen and we moved ten miles away to Waterville by the sea. However, this was probably around 1963 / 1964.

The Stage

Florence and Frank were active for many years in local drama in Cahirciveen, and they participated on a few occasions in the Athlone All Ireland Drama Festival with the local Cahirciveen Drama Group - the Iveronians. I remember my own appearance on stage in one production as a boy on short trousers. I played the role of a butcher's messenger boy, and had to deliver a basket of Turkeys to Rathgar!

Botany

Florence and Frank developed a keen interest in botany and did much research in the Co Kerry and Co Clare area. Some of their research included work on the very rare and important Sea Pea (*Lathirus Japonicus*) in the Rossbeigh area of Co Kerry. My mother was a very accomplished botanical painter and the Cork 800 painting that we have in our house is an excellent example of this. This has individual paintings of 800 flowers then found in Cork City. In the Cork 800 Celebration Year, this painting was bought by the Cork Corporation for display in the Crawford Art Gallery. Subsequently we got the opportunity to buy it back from the Crawford Art Gallery in about 2012.

Folens Irish Environmental Library Series

Florence wrote and illustrated three volumes in the Folens Irish Environmental Library Series. This was a large range of short books designed to appeal to children. These were *The Lusitanian Flora* – No 14, *The Burren Flowers* – No 33, *Irish Seeds and Berries* – No 49. No 48 titled *Irish Weather* was written and illustrated by my late father Frank.

Inverscene Crafts

Florence's interest in the arts was to emerge again in the late 1960s, in a very different way when she started to paint wildflowers. The origin of this new interest in quite interesting. Following the restoration of the old School House in Waterville by my parents as a private house, Florence and Frank decided that they wanted a holiday; they went to the Burren in Co Clare. While there Florence wished to buy a present representative of the Burren for an elderly friend living in the Cable Station in Waterville. They could find nothing in the Burren that was suitable. On her return, Florence found a 4"x 4" wall tile and painted a Gentian for her friend. The Burren is of course well known internationally for the wealth of wildflowers in the area. Not long after Florence started up a small business called *Inverscene Crafts* and so begun a career of painting wildflowers

from life for retail purposes. The main outlets for her craft work and sometimes that of my father was at least one annual Craft Exhibition in Waterville. These Summer Exhibitions started in 1968 and continued until 1978. In total, there was a series of twenty Exhibitions held in our house in Waterville. Occasionally I also exhibited some of my work in timber including wood turning. Chris Warren the then Church of Ireland Rector in Milltown, Co Kerry occasionally took part in these exhibitions. Florence also exhibited in Cork City in the old Munster Arcade, at Crosshaven and at Youghal. Both Frank and Florence exhibited at Writers Week Listowel, Co Kerry in May 1975.

Florence and I took part in a Cork 800 Exhibition in the City Library, rand Parade, Cork City on 5th to 9th November 1985. This was officially opened by Cllr Jim Corr with whom I was quite friendly.

President Richard Nixon 1970

On 4th or 5th October 1970 Richard Nixon President of the United States was on a three day visit to Ireland and was due to visit Waterville. His friend John A Mulcahy owned Waterville House at that time. Florence and Frank were commissioned by the people of Waterville to prepare a botanical presentation for him. On the day of the planned presentation, he was unable to fly to Waterville due to fog, and the gift was sent on to the White House for him. The botanical plaque is illustrated here.

The night before the planned Waterville visit Nixon stayed at Kilfrush House, Hospital, Co Limerick owned by his friend John



A Mulcahy. I was to visit that house some years later. This was in the context of *The Salmon Conservation Council of Ireland* established by Mulcahy. An original Picasso painting behind the door in the male cloakroom was rather unexpected!

My parents had purchased the old Church of Ireland Schoolhouse in Waterville in about 1968. Following my father's death Florence eventually sold the house in 1980, and moved to Coolyduff, Inniscarra, Co Cork.

The Church

Both Frank and Florence were members of the Church of Ireland



Florence in the Sitting Room at The Firs, Cahirciveen, Co Kerry was taken sometime around Christmas 1958. The photograph was taken by my late father.

Select Vestry for the Dromod Union. Florence was for many years

the Organist at the Waterville and Cahirciveen Church of Ireland churches, and from time to time at the Church on Valentia Island. In the early days, the only access to Valentia was by local ferry and it could be a very rough crossing indeed!

Archaeological Survey

My parents started an archaeological survey of monuments in the immediate south Kerry area when I was quite young. The survey area was initially limited to easy cycling distance from Cahirciveen, and later from Waterville by car. Many of these monuments were surveyed with homemade equipment made by my father, drawn by my mother, and photographed by my father. They were greatly encouraged in this work by the late Prof. Michael O'Kelly, Professor of Archaeology at UCC and by the archaeologist, the late Sean P O'Riordain. I recall visits by Michael O'Kelly to our house in Waterville when I was quite young.

Slieve Breagh Excavations, Co Meath 1960 - 1962

Florence and Frank were asked by Dr Marcus Ó h-Eochaidhe to take part in an archaeological excavation at Slieve Breagh, 3 miles north west of Slane, Co Meath in the period 1960 -1962; I

am not sure which year. As a young boy of 13/15 years I was also involved in this excavation. This excavation revealed post holes from three hut sites each about 5 metres in diameter. These were developed by early Neolithic / Bronze Age farmers. The following

extract is taken from a UCC Post Graduate study proposal. One of the stone hammer heads referred to below was found by Florence in the bottom of a post hole.

The lithic assemblage from Slieve Breagh consists of delicately manufactured arrowheads, a variety of scrapers, quartz/crystal points, flake debitage and a number of hammer stones. The pottery and architectural evidence from the Neolithic huts places the earliest dating of this site from the Grooved Ware period of c. 2900 BC.

Death of Frank 1979

Frank died aged 62 at home in Waterville on 10th February 1979 and is buried in the Church of Ireland graveyard in Waterville, Co Kerry with my mother.

Florence moves to Cork

Following the death of my father in 1979, my mother moved to a rented house in Muskerry Estate close to where we were then living

People Florence Met

As a young woman of about 25 / 26 years of age Florence seems to have extraordinary access to the many international artists visiting Dublin and Radio Eireann. Some of these artists were as follows.

John McCormack -	A Tenor of international musical importance, born in Ireland in 1884.
Sir Hamilton Harty -	An Irish and British composer, conductor, pianist and organist.
Vincent O'Brien -	Best known as the first singing teacher of Irish celebrities John McCormick and Margaret Burke Sheridan.
Horace Stevens -	Bass-Baritone, born in 1876 in Melbourne, Australia.
Walter Widdop -	English Tenor born in Yorkshire.
Heddle Nash -	English lyric Tenor.
Elena Danieli -	Contralto.
Joseph Farrington -	Famous Bass Baritone.
Dr Adrian Boulton -	English conductor born in 1889.
Thelma Reiss -	Cellist born in Plymouth in 1906.
Constant Lambert -	British composer and conductor.
Henry Hall -	British band leader who played from the 1920s to the 1950s.
Eak Tai Ahn -	Korean composer.
Yehudi Menuhin -	Russian-Jewish-American violinist, who spent most of his performing career in the United Kingdom.
Serge Rachmaninoff -	Russian composer, pianist and conductor considered to have been the finest pianist of his day.
Manuel Rosenthal -	Conductor of the French National Orchestra.
Germaine Cernay -	French Mezzo Contralto.
Charles Lynch -	Irish pianist who premiered works by several important 20 th century composers.
Sydney MacEwan -	Scottish Tenor and singer of traditional Scottish and Irish song.
Dame Sybil Thorndike -	British Shakespearian actress born in 1882.
Benno Moiseiwitsch -	Ukrainian-born British pianist.
Margaret Burke-Sheridan -	Irish Opera singer, born in Castlebar, Co Mayo.
Jean Sibelius -	Finnish composer of the late Romantic period, whose music played an important part in the formation of Finnish national identity.

on the same estate. We decided to build our own house at Coolyduff Inniscarra on the proceeds of the sale of Florence's house in Waterville and our house in Muskerry Estate. Florence died on 17th March 2001 at St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork. She is buried at the Church of Ireland Church in Waterville, Co Kerry.

In August 1947 in the month following my birth my father composed the following poem written about me and his hopes for my future. The locations mentioned here are all in the Cahirciveen, Co Kerry area. Each time I re-read this piece, I wonder how in life I have measured up to the thoughts in the poem. The last half of the poem seems to be saying that I would be fine in life, if I could find beauty in the environment which I do!

Will those soft cheeks be tanned by tropic sun,
Or whipped by Arctic wind?
Will that brain rule a State, will those feet run
To fame before a cheering crowd's acclaim?
Will tiny hands pour forth Beethoven's soul,
Or grasp a general's sword,
Or guide Humanity's frail ship from shoal
To deeper sea?
For those I do not pray – I only ask
That those two feet shall never turn
To softer carpets than a Kerry bog,
Nor ever spurn
The mountain goat-track's pathway to the stars.
That those soft cheeks be softer by the wind
That tips Benteen,
Those lovely lips be kissed
By Iveragh's wind and rain.
Those eyes see beauty in a storm-tossed sky.
In Drung Hill bathed in Summer gold.
Those ears hear God's own music passing by
In waves on Beginish shore.