

BOOK REVIEW

Maureen O'Carroll: A Musical Memoir of an Irish Immigrant Childhood

Authors: Maureen O'Carroll and Leora O'Carroll

Foreword: Barry Tuckwell AC, OBE

Independently Published

ISBN: 9781794251526

Paperback, 207 pages

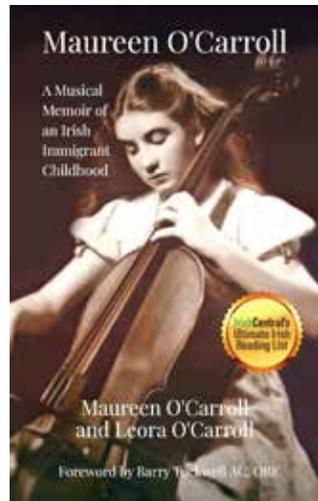
Price: \$19.80

Reviewed by Oliver P Rafferty*

This delightful memoir by the well-known Australian cellist is a splendid read. It presents a window into a lost world of Catholic and Irish Australian immigrant experience prior to and during World War II. O'Carroll charts the profound influence of her parents on her upbringing, her religious faith and her career. Although from a fairly typical Irish Catholic working-class background, the family was deeply musical, something much encouraged by her parents, John and May. Her father in particular was well versed in Irish rebel songs. The O'Carrolls initially went to New Zealand in 1925 but by 1930, they had settled in the Balmain area of Sydney, and there raised ten children.

O'Carroll's parents were both involved in the Dublin Easter Rising of 1916, that was how they met, the subsequent War of Independence (1919–21) and the Civil War (1922–23). It was perhaps as a result of the disillusionment with the Ireland that emerged from these traumas that persuaded the O'Carrolls to seek a new life in the antipodes. Their Irish rebel culture, however, never deserted them. Not only did her father display framed photographs of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising in their home, but every Easter Sunday the O'Carrolls *en masse*, with a variety of friends, went to the Catholic section of the Waverley cemetery in Sydney to honour the dead of 1916. A practice her father kept up until his death in 1956, and in her mother's case until her demise in 1988.

* Oliver P Rafferty is Professor of History at Boston College.



The O'Carroll children were picked on at school because their accents were heavily influenced by their parents' Irish brogues. Although desperate to integrate into her school and Australian culture Maureen remained something of an Irish rebel at heart. In later life while a cellist for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, she walked off the stage at a performance rather than play Rule Britannia. She returned



The O'Carroll family

only when that particular musical interlude was ended, and she managed to keep her job. The story O'Carroll tells is filled with the ups and downs of an, at times, difficult life at the lower end of the social stratum in Australian society in the 1930s and 1940s. The family was somewhat puritanical and the girls especially were not encouraged to fraternize with members of the opposite sex. When they began to do so they would go to dances, and assured their parents that they were attending musical concerts. The children were sent to the State Conservatorium of Music, where Maureen was taught the cello by the idiosyncratically named William Ewart Gladstone Bell. A shortage of money meant that the children were withdrawn and sent for music lessons to the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, where the sisters did not charge much, but neither did they teach the cello with any accomplishment, and Maureen was soon back with Mr. Bell. Maureen could, at times, be a difficult pupil for the nuns at St. Augustine's School, but the fact that she and her brothers and sisters were such musical talents meant that the high spirited jinxes they were given to were, usually, quickly overlooked.

only when that particular musical interlude was ended, and she managed to keep her job.

The story O'Carroll tells is filled with the ups and downs of an, at times, difficult life at the lower end of the social stratum in Australian society in the 1930s and 1940s. The family was somewhat puritanical and the girls especially were not encouraged to fraternize with members of

Life in the O'Carroll household was marked by music, politics and religion. A quintessentially devout family, her father was on friendly terms with the local parish priest of St Augustine's in Balmain.



Maureen playing cello in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra

Himself an Irishman, he would frequently visit the O'Carrolls and reminisce



Trio of Maureen with her sisters Patricia (harp) and Cathleen (violin)

about Ireland. Sometimes these conversations would turn to politics and there would be strong words between the priest and John O'Carroll, which would result in a rupture between priest and parishioner. As a result the children would be, temporarily, withdrawn from the Catholic school and sent to the state school. These transitory exiles were excruciating for the children as most of their fellow pupils at the

state school were both Protestant and pro-imperialist, and the O'Carrolls suffered from the fact of their Catholicism and their Irish nationalism.

Despite her mother's deep religiosity she earned money on the side as the exotically named Madame Llarraco, which Maureen and one her sisters discovered by going through her things in a large Gladstone bag she kept in a cupboard. The children worked out that Llarraco was O'Carroll spelt backwards. Her mother had a thriving business in telling women's fortunes, a skill she learned from her grandmother in Ireland. Is it a peculiarly Irish phenomenon to combine deeply held Catholic doctrine with non-Christian superstition and practice?

Maureen's musical career began with an offer of work with the New Zealand National Orchestra in 1950, when she was barely eighteen. Her mother encouraged her to take the job which paid ten pounds a week. Maureen's mother made the case that the extra cash would be useful to help raise her younger siblings. Maureen's account largely ends with her first job, more's the pity. Leora O'Carroll provides a brief overview of her mother's later life. Her marriage and her three children, years spent in the USA and her return to Australia. This work, which has already received enormous praise, deserves to be widely read and it is highly recommended.



Maureen O'Carroll's family

*Maureen O'Carroll and Leora O'Carroll: A Musical Memoir of an Irish
Immigrant Childhood,*

See review on page 157.

