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Dhún na nGall  
Donegal County Council

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Coiste um Fhorbairt Pobail Áitiúil  
Dhún na nGall  
Donegal Local Community Development  
Committee

## Echoes of the Decade – Oral History Strand

### Interview Report Form

<b>Name of Interviewer</b>	Regina Fitzpatrick
<b>Date(s) of Interview(s)</b>	5 November 2020
<b>Location</b>	Phone interview - Helen in Co. Donegal, Regina in Co. Kilkenny.
<b>Name of Interviewee</b>	Helen Meehan (née Montgomery)
<b>Gender</b>	Female
<b>Year of Birth</b>	1937
<b>Interview Synopsis</b>	
Helen Meehan is from Frosses, Co. Donegal. She is a published historian and retired primary school teacher. In this interview Helen talks about the history of her local area focussing on events that took place during the revolutionary period of 1912-1923. She recounts stories she heard from older relatives who were involved in the War of Independence and Civil War and accounts she found in her research of the period. Themes and topics in this interview include: the local history of the area; local demographics; social, political and economic history; the study of history; education; religion; the Gaelic Revival; Séamus McManus; Ethna Carbery; partition; Northern Irish Troubles; Emigration.	
<b>Time-Coded Interview Summary</b>	
00:00 Introduction	
00:55 Born outside Frosses in south Donegal in 1937. Eldest of seven. Her interest in history came from her father Robert Montgomery. Went to National School in Frosses and then to the Preparatory College in Falcarragh. Studied to be a primary school teacher in Carysfort College. Taught in the Loretto Covent North Great George Street, Dublin before returning home to teach in Frosses. Married John Meehan and went to live in his ancestral home.	
02:46 Donegal Historical Society school's competition in 1983 and her own history research. Giving talks and writing for various annuals including <i>The Donegal Annual</i> , <i>The Spark, Due North</i> .	
04:30 Retired in 1998. Her book <i>Inver Parish in History</i> . Wrote a biography of Ethna	

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Carbery and an updated edition of *Tracing Your Donegal Ancestors*. Contributed to the *Atlas of County Donegal* and the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Local historical groups. Is a past president of the Donegal Historical Society and current Treasurer, also a member of the Ulster Federation. Local history projects she has worked on.

06:13 Her father's interest in the plantation of Ulster. His family had books. He was a Fianna Fáil supporter. He was very open-minded about the Civil war. Father born in 1907.

08:01 Her father used sayings from the revolutionary period eg. 'they left country like a flying column'. Her father's family. Helen knew her paternal grandmother, a Conwell from Killybegs. Her paternal grandfather was Robert Montgomery. History of the Montgomerys in the area – Catholic for 5 generations. Local landlords in Drumbeg. One may have converted to Catholicism and was disowned/disinherited from the family around 1820.

10:59 The Montgomerys came to the area at the Dawn of the Ulster Scots. American branch of the family. Her father's family were all farmers.

11:57 Her mother's family were Gallaghers from Ballymacahill. Their involvement the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Fine Gael supporters. Strength of Ancient Order of Hibernians that area at the time.

13:15 Both her mother's parents were Gallaghers and Helen knew them well and her uncle who lived on at home. Memories of helping her grandmother. Her grandfather also liked to talk about politics. Helen was politically aware from a young age.

14:20 Her Gallagher grandparents were married around 1910. Story about a shoot out that happened near their home during the Civil War.

16:11 Not a lot of activity in the period 1912-1923 in that area of Donegal compared to other parts. Stories about the Black and Tans ransacking houses in the locality. References flying columns and safe houses. Black and Tans stationed in Donegal Town, Killybegs and Mountcharles.

17:57 Relationships between Catholics and Protestants in that area in the time before 1912. Catholic membership of the RIC. Demographic of Catholics and Protestants in the parish. Current population trends in the area.

20:17 Historically businesses in Donegal town would have been predominantly protestant. Relationships between faiths.

22:03 Eastern side of the parish part of the Conyngham estate, Mount Charles family. Western side of the parish was the Montgomery estate up to 1848 when the Sinclairs arrived, Their main residence at Hollyhill Strabane. Both bought out during the Wyndham act of 1903.

23:11 No great divide in the Donegal Bay area unlike North/Northwest of Donegal. The Land League. Describes the political landscape of the area.

25:05 Main industries in the area. Inver was also a big fishing area but has declined now. Account from the time of O'Donovan's survey describing the type of farming in

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the area.

27:25 Political organisations active in the area at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century. Mentions Ancient Order of Hibernians; Home Rule support; republicanism in the area since the time of Wolfetone manifested in the Gaelic League.

28:51 Séamus McManus and his role in the Gaelic League in Donegal Town. Oisín club in Mountcharles. His work collecting stories and publishing them in the *The Shan Van Vocht*, edited by Alice Milligan and Ethna Carbery in Belfast.

29:37 Family history of Ethna Carbery. Connection with the 1798 rebellion. Their home was a place where people of like minds gathered - those interested in culture, the Gaelic League, The Kickham Society, Amnesty and other organisations.

31:00 Séamus also involved in the INTO and was a delegate to congress in Belfast in 1896 where we met Ethna.

31:31 1898 Commemorations of the 1798 Rebellion. Seamus's involvement in the organisation of those commemorations along with his brother Patrick who was home from Argentina. Decoration Day – decorating the graves of the patriot dead on Wolfetone's birthday. Mentions the Annals of the Four Masters.

32:56 Gaelic League in Belfast organised Feiseanna / competitions. Organised a day in Donegal also, mentions Richard Bonar and events in Barnesmore Gap, Glenties and Fintown. Prizes presented by Ethna Carbery.

34:04 Irish only spoken up in the Bluestacks at this stage. The Irish language in that area. 1901 census findings on the Irish language. Séamus McManus not raised through Irish. Irish classes run by the Gaelic League.

37:04 1898 commemorations in the parish of Raphoe. Bishop O'Donnell and the Revival. The building of St Eunan's Cathedral in Letterkenny. Organisation of an aonach/gathering in Letterkenny to promote Gaelic culture and goods of Irish manufacture while raising money for the Church. First time a play was seen in the area, *The Coming of Conal*, by Fr Eugene O'Growney. Ethna Carbery and Alice Milligan involved in the production.

40:00 Séamus McManus coming to the attention of the RIC and the school inspectors. Moved to America to interview Irish organisations there for a French journal. The publication of his collected material in America. Returned home after a couple of years and resumed his activities with the Gaelic League. Married Ethna in 1901. Ethna died of TB at Easter 1902 and is buried in Frosses.

43:07 Séamus wrote for Arthur Griffith's newspapers. Meeting Seán McDermott Patrick Pearse. Séamus's prominence in the 'Battle of the Rotunda' at an Irish Parliamentary Party congress. Mentions Maud Gonne.

44:23 Reference to a Gaelic League meeting in the Rotunda which Séamus attended with Cahir Healy, his connection with Seán McDermott.

45:10 Pearse and the Gaelic League's interest in having Irish taught in schools. Coláiste Uladh in Donegal. Pearse's visits there in 1906 and 1907. Pearse's visits to

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schools around Donegal in 1907. Visited Carrick, where there was meeting organised by Fr Cassidy. Another big day in Croagh. Meeting with teachers and priests in that area finishing in Donegal. Pearse stayed Séamus McManus's house.

46:50 Seamus's investment the foundation of St Enda's School and Cló Chulainn.

47:16 Election of 1910, the Home Rule Party holding the balance of power in Westminster. Impact of this on Gaelic Revival. Patrick McManus's investment in Arthur Griffith's newspaper.

48:58 The life of Patrick McManus, Séamus's brother. His membership in the American Navy. Founded a branch of the Gaelic League in Argentina. Founded a newspaper called *Fianna*. Bought land in Donegal. Supporter of Irish causes. Funded the translation of John Mitchel's Jail Journal.

51:04 Protestant opposition to Home Rule. Local signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant and Declaration in 1912. Foundation of Ulster Volunteers in 1913 locally. The local Orange Lodge. The setting up of the Irish Volunteers locally.

52:40 Outbreak of World War I. Locals enlisting in the British Army. IRB efforts to establish in the area. Séamus McManus unable to return home due to the Defence again the Realm Act. Attitude changes after the 1916 Rising. Leading to the reorganisation of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan in the area.

54:20 Political affiliations of those involved in the Gaelic Revival.

56:25 Story about the Marquis Conyngham's fishing boat which the Volunteers took to St Peter Lake and raised the tricolour. Feis in Teelin. First public sighting of the tricolour in that part of Donegal.

58:03 Ms Castles and Ms O'Callaghan organisers of Cumann na mBan in that area. Establishment of Sinn Féin clubs. Names of the clubs locally the Patrick Sarsfields, the Seán McDermotts etc. Cumann na mBan club called Iníon Dubh after the mother of Red Hugh O'Donnell.

59:41 Political landscape of the area. Conscription. Cumann na mBan organisation of Lá na mBan around the feast of Colmcille. Petitions signed outside churches against conscription.

1:01:32 1918 General Election. Mentions PJ Ward (Sinn Féin candidate); O'Donovan (Home Rule Party). Extension of franchise to women over thirty. Distance away from polling booth and the impact of this on voting. Sinn Féin swept the board.

1:03:26 Mentions the Spanish Flu. Reference to the counting of the 2020 US Presidential Elections [on-going at the time of this interview]. Celebrations after the 1918 election.

1:05:48 War of Independence in the area. Black and Tan activity in the area. Burning of the local creamery. The involvement in the movement of Patrick Barry, the creamery manager from Cork. Safe houses, flying columns and attacks on commercial enterprises, post offices etc. Interruptions to rail services.

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1:07:50 Describes the biggest event in Mountcharles during the War of Independence. Ambush on RIC men on their way to police a fair and the attack on the town that night by Black and Tans. Burning of houses, raid on McManus house. Discovery of a girl who had been shot and killed during one of the raids by the Black and Tans, Mary Harley. Her father had been a superintendent in the Metropolitan police in London. Story about her funeral in Frosses and arrests that day by the Black and Tans. Helen's uncle Charlie searched on that day also. Many of the local men involved in the movement arrested and imprisoned. Fear of people of the Black and Tans.

1:14:54 The Civil War in the area. Describes Coolum, where Helen's husband John was born and raised and where Helen lives now. John's father's prominence in the community – mentions the local Board of Guardians, District Council, the Creamery Committee, the Ancient Order of Hibernians. He and his brothers joined the Irish Volunteers along with their cousins, the Monaghans. Coolum House as a safe house. The women of the house in Cumann na mBan.

1:16:34 Difficult to get the women to talk about their involvement, minor references to carrying messages etc. Talks about knowing these men and women herself and trying to chat with them about the War of Independence. The women of the house marrying republicans - one aunt married Jonathan McNeilus. Aunt Cathy married a Joe Walsh, a nationalist from Belfast who was friends with the Coughlan family (local political family). Aunt Annie had a boyfriend in the movement, the end of their relationship when he took the pro-treaty side.

1:19:25 Prominence of the Monaghan family on the anti-treaty side, their house was burnt down by the local pro-treaty forces. Mentions photo of Dr Glackin in that house. Monaghans had stone quarries.

1:21:16 House on the Sinclair estate was burned in retaliation of the shooting of the Drumboe martyrs.

1:22:09 Aftermath of Civil War – silence as a coping method. Political debates in pubs and on fair days. People had to get on with their lives, helped each other out with farm work etc. Eventually people married across the treaty divide. A lot of emigration in the aftermath. Political independence wasn't economic independence. Anti-treaty men, in particular, emigrated to America.

1:24:45 Some who emigrated to America returned during the Great Depression.

1:25:10 Her father-in-law and his brother were arrested and imprisoned in the Curragh during the Civil War. Conditions there. Silence about those times.

1:26:29 Flaring up of political tensions around election time or around the 12 July. 15 August, a big Ancient Order of Hibernians Day.

1:27:50 Helen's father was a Fianna Fáil supporter, but his family were not as active as John's family. Her mother's family were Fine Gael supporters. Story about her Uncle Willie.

1:28:40 Helen's father had one sister only and she had emigrated to America during

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this period. Her father would talk about things that happened during that period.

1:29:37 Founding of Clann na Poblachta and the election of 1949. Joe Brennan (Fine Gael candidate); Pa O'Donnell, Phonsie Kenan (Clann na Poblachta). Some Fianna Fáil supporters went over to Clann na Poblachta at this time. Political discussions in school and slogans across the sides during the elections.

[On reviewing her interview, Helen asked to clarify in the interview notes that Joe Brennan, the Fine Gael candidate in the 1949 General Election was not local]

1:31:22 Her School Master McGroarty had been prominent in the Movement in his young days. Mentions Mrs Barry another teacher in the school who was in Cumann na mBan. Talks about a culture of silence around politics.

1:32:15 How history was taught in schools.

1:34:10 Not allowed newspapers when she was in college in Loreto Preparatory School in Falcarragh. All-Irish speaking. Carysfort had a strong emphasis on Irish. Story about De Valera visiting Carysfort College.

[On reviewing her interview, Helen asked to clarify in the interview notes that in the Loreto Preparatory College in Falcarragh, Irish was spoken at all times and pupils were closely supervised to ensure that their interactions with one another were in Irish. There were more students in Carysfort Teacher Training College and so while speaking Irish to one another was expected, it was not as closely supervised]

1:37:30 The history curriculum during Helen's career ended at 1921. Helen's school and college career.

1:39:01 Her life in Dublin as a student and a young teacher. Mentions the Legion of Mary and Gaelic League céilís. Teaching in the Loretto primary School on Hill Street in Dublin. Current perception of what life was like then and how her youth compares with the lives of young people today.

1:43:19 Returning to Donegal in 1960. Not many young people around due to emigration. Life in Donegal started to become more prosperous in the 1960s. Talks about an element of social segregation in Dublin. Mentions the Donegal Association and dances at Barry's Hotel in Dublin. Going to Gill's bookshop in Dublin and to libraries.

1:47:36 Returned home in 1960 and taught in Frosses National School. Married John a couple of years later. Mentions Master McGroarty and Master Coughlan (the grandfather of Mary Coughlan who later served as the first female Tánaiste in Dáil Éireann). His wife was related to Helen and to John. Marriage arrangements at that time in Donegal.

1:47:35 Her two sisters were nuns, one in Dublin and one in Kenya. Talks about how regimented life was in general at that time. A lot of vocations locally at that time. Orders would go around to the schools to talk about vocations. Some of the boys joined the Christian brothers.

1:51:36 Helen's children born in the 1960s and 1970s – Eucharia, Rosaria, Edward

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and Roberta. Master Coughlan's son Cathal became principle after his father retired. The death of his Clement Coughlan leading to Cathal running for his seat as a TD. Cathal's death. The political career of his daughter Mary.

1:53:00 The impact locally of Clement Coughlan's running for Fianna Fáil. Helen's approach to teaching history and politics. Teaching during the Troubles.

1:56:45 Life in Donegal during the Troubles, people being held up at the border. Women going on buses to do their shopping into the North.

1:58:40 The views of her parent's generation on the conflict in the north. Mentions gerrymandering, comparing farming schemes in the north and south. Crossing the border, going to buy tractors and parts. Experiences of being stopped or delayed at the border when travelling by bus. Perceptions of Ireland among Americans.

2:02:38 Tension at times of major events or atrocities. Story about some locals who were in the B Specials. Relationships between Catholics and Protestants at the time.

2:04:06 Helen;s reflections on commemoration. Commemorations of the Plantation of Ulster and the Civil War. Silence around the Civil War. Mentions documentary recently aired on TG4 'Foréigean ar Mhná' about sexual violence and women during the War of Independence and Civil War. Striking the right balance, unearthing unheard stories etc. Need to put Irish history into a wider international context.

2:08:37 Commemoration of World War I. Paddy Harte's role in remembering the Irish who fought in World War I. World War II and the generals in the British Army at that time who were Ulster Scots – media coverage of World War II in Ireland.

2:10:35 Agenda of the Irish Free state in the first half of the twentieth century. Ridding us of our colonial past, 'a nation once again' etc. Helen's thoughts on the current coalition between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The end of Civil War politics.

2:13:19 Major changes in Ireland in Helen's lifetime – Ireland joining the European Union – Helen's views on the EU, mentions the McGill Summer School.

2:16:22 Legacy of 1912-1923. Accepting history for good and for ill.

2:19:22 The lack of compensation for many poor families whose houses served as safe houses. The new state creating a more authoritarian than compassionate society. Emigration as a safety valve. Poor division of wealth in Ireland.

2:22:46 Helen's views on Brexit.

2:24:03 Reflects on the commemorations, pacifism.

2:25:36 End of interview.

***Addendum to interview added on 3 December 2020***

00:00 Significance of emigration from the area. Not always economic emigration.

01:31 Modern day perceptions of emigration in earlier years. Social and family

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reasons for emigration.

02:52 The reverence given to the returned emigrants and their letters home.

03:35 Story about a neighbour who had emigrated and returned for the summer.

05:03 Emigrants who have returned, economic prosperity of those who left and those who stayed. Hard work, loneliness and alcoholism among emigrants in England. Glamorous image of emigration.

07:00 Not much organised seasonal migration in the south of the county. Some did go and come to England for short periods because it was close.

07:50 Remittances home from emigrants. The impact of air travel on the lives of emigrants.

08:58 Emigration to relatives in Brooklyn, New York and Philadelphia from that part of Donegal. Very little emigration to Boston or Chicago from that part of Donegal. Generational difference between emigrants.

10:14 Emigrant perceptions of Ireland. His father's mother's family were Conwells from Killybegs and his aunt's emigrated to Brooklyn, New York. She did hairdressing and embroidery there. Her experience there. The letters and parcels home. Mentioned second-hand shops in America.

12:32 Anti-Treaty emigration after the Civil War. Some returned during the Great Depression. Continuation of republican sentiment abroad.

15:49 Number of girls who had emigrated from the area when Helen returned to teach in Donegal in 1960s. Economic improvement after that with Ireland's membership of the EEC and agricultural schemes etc.

14:40 Men and women emigrated in equal measure.

15:40 Recording ends.

<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Restricted Information</b>	None
<b>Field Notes</b>	This interview was recording on the phone with Helen. There are notes added throughout the interview summary from conversations which took place after Helen had the opportunity to listen to her interview. Helen also asked to add an addendum on the topic of emigration which was recorded subsequently. It is noteworthy that this interview took place in the context of Level 4 lockdown during the Covid 19 pandemic. Additionally, negotiations were underway between the EU and Britain around Britain's exit from the EU with its consequences for the Northern Ireland border still unclear at the time of the interview. At the time of this interview, the count for the 2020 US Presidential

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	election was underway and these 3 contemporary events feature in the interview. Helen's encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of her area and of her family history was a pleasure to record.
<b>Audio File Details</b>	
Recording Format: 48kHz 16 bit stereo	
Length of Interview(s): Interview 1 (2:25:36); Addendum (15:49)	
No. of Files: 4	
File Types: 2 uncompressed WAV files and 2 corresponding MP3 copies	
<b>Documentation Completed by Interviewee</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Registration Form</li><li>✓ Pre-questionnaire Monitoring Form</li><li>✓ Participation Agreement</li><li>✓ Post-questionnaire Monitoring Form</li><li>✓ Recording Agreement</li><li>✓ Participant Sign-in Sheet</li><li>✓ Photograph of Interviewee</li></ul>	

**To be completed by Interviewer:**

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Signed:           Regina Fitzpatrick

Date:           18 December 2020