

Lace & Maggie

~ Bernadette Morris ~

This day 130 years ago a little girl called Margarit was born to Bridget and Tom Finneran in Carramore Croghan. She was their 5th Daughter. She had one brother Patrick. All of Margarit's sisters married including her younger sister Ellen who travelled to England following the death of her mother in 1928, and she married a British soldier there. He was later killed during the London Blitz in 1941.

Margarit or Maggie as we call her, living in depth of the unspoilt rural west of Ireland became a lace- maker in her teens. My granny Kate, (the oldest Finneran sister) told me so many stories about her own life when I was a little child. Stories about her friends, her neighbours - things they did together and about meeting her husband Cormack while saving turf in the bog. She often spoke about her sister's skill at sewing and needlework. I remember she once commented to me while watching me make dresses for my dolls, "I know by the way you hold the needle you will be a fine seamstress one day". She had foresight!. I made my first garment at age 12 – a beautiful aquamarine blue velvet dress which I wore when my friend Sarah Feely and I performed at a retirement function in Croghan for our teacher Mrs Annie Fay. (Sarah was a wonderful fiddle player, I played chromatic accordion) The very tricky technical issues regarding fabrics with nap commonly encountered when working with velvet didn't faze me!

I later went on to study fashion design and I also spent a short period apprenticing to a fine tailor. I went on to design and make garments for my living for over thirty years. I have for as long as I can remember loved to crochet as a hobby. I have also sold many many pieces for charity fundraiser.

Maggie has always intrigued me. Was she like me fascinated with creating beautiful wearable things from threads?

For decades I have this longing to know Maggie better. My granny died in 1972 when I was 13 years old, so I never got my answers. How I wish I had asked her more questions about Maggie and her fine skills.

A few years ago, my neighbour Leona Mearron/Carney tagged me on a Facebook post where another lady had been looking to find somebody who was well versed in Irish lace making. That inquiry sparked a renewed interest in me about Maggie and her lace making and indeed her general life. Maggie's name is not inscribed on either of our family gravestones. She appeared to be forgotten.

So last year I decided to try and walk in Maggie's footsteps as a Lacemaker for a little while. First I contacted a number of Lacemaking groups and individuals around Ireland to try and ascertain what type of Irish Lacemaking was likely to have been carried out in Co Roscommon or in Connaught in the early 1900's. I have found the women in the Lace making community throughout Ireland to be a wonderful friendly, helpful, enthusiastic group of people. Nora Finnegan of Kenmare Lace, Mary O' Neill from Carlow, and Headford Lacemaking Project, in particular Ann O' Hara Quinn, have all provided me with an extraordinary amount of information and history of the Irish Lacemaking tradition in Ireland. It truly has been an extraordinary journey for me, I am so thankful to those ladies who helped me.

I have also recently read Barry Feely's book 'Good Mercy' where he includes an excerpt from Sr Gerardine's writings (who was my school principal during the 1970's in Schoil Chriost on Rí) Her writings give a wonderful outline of the lacemaking tuition tradition in the Convent of Mercy, Boyle, Co Roscommon which went from 1903 to 1915. But other than that, so far I have found no other information on Roscommon's lacing-making history. But my search will continue!

I always knew Maggie played the melodeon. My dad also played that little single row melodeon and he taught me to play on that melodeon at age 8 or 9.

I have heard so many stories about the Finneran family, mostly stories about the 3 sisters- Lizzy, Delia and Maryanne all of whom emigrated to the USA as teenagers and their younger sister who went to the UK, but Maggie appeared the one less remembered.

Packie I knew lived into his 60s until 1957, the year before I was born.

I have now discovered that Marguerite Jane Finneran was born on the 28th of April 1892. She remained living and helping in the family farm home with her brother

Packie until she died of heart failure aged 53 on the 5th of July 1945 in the house where she was born. She was buried in Killappogue, Cemetery, Croghan. I am now placing a plaque in her memory there. I am so sorry to have never seen any of her lace that I can remember. Although I vaguely remember altar cloths in the Finneran cottage as a child, they were most likely Maggie's. They were used for the station mass held in homes throughout the parish in every Townland. Perhaps they were embellished with Maggie's lace.

Lace was a big part of clerical garments and alter dressing. The original Carrickmacross lace was appliqué, on a net. But there was a second, net-less style: guipure lace, favoured by the British royals. Queen Victoria is said to be very partial to guipure. Kate Middleton also wore guipure on her wedding day.

I have spent the past few months learning fine needle Irish lace making, with guidance from Mary O'Neill's book. What an extraordinary skill. - a completely new skill to me. It truly is an exquisite skill. Irish Handmade Lacemaking is widely regarded as an art throughout the globe.

Fine needle lacemaking must have been so difficult in Irish cottages in poor light. It's so hard to imagine how incredibly difficult it must have been to work these fine needle crafts without good quality electric light. Apparently a lot of Irish lacemaker worked sitting outdoors in natural light as the windows in Irish cottages were very small providing poor quality light.

I have also polished up my crochet skills and converted to very fine hooks and fine threads to produce a number of pieces of both Irish Crochet Lace and also a few pieces of fine needle lace in particular Carrickmacross Lace.

I have gifted my first pieces of Irish Lace to my grandchildren Isabelle and Hugo Morris, and their wonderful parents my oldest son David & my daughter in law Olivia.

I have also been invited to display some of my Irish Crochet Lace pieces in the Headford Lace Project in Galway in June of this year. I will be delighted to do this in memory of Maggie.

Thank you Maggie for bringing me on the most beautiful creative, highly skilled, fascinating journey despite my physical limitations.

I'll see to it that Margarit Jane Finneran will never be forgotten about in our family again.

And I have awakened an old family skill. HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAGGIE

See images of Bernadette's Irish Crochet & Lace pieces below which will be on display in the Headford Lace Project in Galway in June of this year











Each
Crochet
Lace

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26th March 2022





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