

"From West Cork to Anjou"

by Denis O'Mahony

For the author of this memoir, the family links with France go back two generations and quite probably much earlier but of that we have no record. Born in Brade, Myross in the mid-twenties, he was taken to Angers before the age of four to join other siblings in the care of an aunt whose interesting personality shine through the narrative but whose story remains not fully recorded.

His growing up and schooling in Angers were punctuated by summer visits to Brade where he renewed himself with the sights and smells of his native sod; this is something particularly appreciated by those who, in spite of their rootedness in West Cork, find themselves living far from the scenes and smells they love. This unusual and quite pleasant upbringing was interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939, when trips to Ireland ceased.

There followed the experiences through the phony war, then the German invasion and the increasing repression as the Nazi regime tightened its grip on all aspects of life. His home did not escape being raided by the Gestapo and there is the all too brief mention of the quiet - even silent - heroism of a sister who, for her efforts on behalf of the oppressed, was a prisoner for the remainder of the war. There are agonizing insights on the fate of the Jewish community as the Nazi program was put into effect.

His efforts to keep himself informed on Ireland and her history inevitably led to his coming into contact with the Breton community - and in fact with the entire Breton leadership: there almost haphazard encounters continued right through to the end of the war - and into the post-war years when many of them found refuge in Ireland. This part of the story gives a valuable insight into an aspect of the situation, overlooked in the general accounts of the conflict.

With the liberation of Angers in 1944, again by a chance encounter, he is enlisted as an interpreter with the American administrators. It is his experiences in this role, where he is entrusted with responsibilities quite unusual for an eighteen-year-old that constitutes the most significant part of his memoir. And it is told with remarkable fairness, balance and always a sense of sympathy for helpless humanity caught in impossible situations. His American associates emerge in clear focus and his effective mediation between impatient Americans and offended French earns him the nickname "l'Ambassadeur". These responsibilities are shared with his dear friend, Victor de Pange, (a nephew of renowned physicist Louis de Broglie) who was later to fill a career of service with the Council of Europe at Strasbourg.

Back in Cork he soon realized that financial constraints would not allow him to pursue his studies in Ireland - particular in UCC. He returned to France, where after a stint at the Irish hospital at St. Lo (Beckett had already left) he registered at the Sorbonne specializing in French philology and literature. A combination of daytime work to eke out a living and study at night led to a Doctorate in 1951 when his Professor solemnly told him that he "had fulfilled a gap in the history of seventeenth century French literature."

More important for Denis in that final year was meeting Madeleine, now his wife of over fifty years, and to whom the book is dedicated. The story of their seven years in Belfast rounds out the narrative. They now divide their time between London, where most of their family live, and their alternate home in Myross.

here is a unique story happily now put on record and told throughout with gentle humanity and at certain points with hilarious humour. It is recommended without reservation.