

# REVIEW

Audrey Hepburn and the making of 'Breakfast at Tiffanys' Books, Page 11

## The great outsider of Irish poetry

Desmond O'Grady is acclaimed the world over but virtually unknown in his native Ireland. The poet tells **David Young** how he travelled the globe, through Paris, Rome, Persia and Egypt, finding love, and fathering children along the way, but he always stayed true to his calling — no matter what the cost

**Y**OU KNOCK at the door. No answer. You step inside, and call his name. Again, no reply. You find your way into the front room and sit down by a writing desk, hoping the random noises in the back belong to Desmond O'Grady's manoeuvrings, and not just a stray cat. And you wait.

He emerges, and shuffles towards you. His flinty expression wrapped in a cravat, he scans his visitor, and then the room for where to alight. You strain to collect the fizz and gurgle of his first words. They seem to admonish, as if you're a day late for some nameless boat that's already sailed. Then he smiles. And you get it. It's the opening act — played with the roguish charm of a swashbuckler, who's anchored in more ports than he cares to remember. It's also his way of inveigling into banter, and testing you.

O'Grady is the great outsider of Irish poetry. And he's lived the authentic artist's life — at full Bacchanalian tilt, true to his beliefs, and without regret. He's a wandering Celt who's seen the world and returned. And today, his hermitage, as he calls it, is Kinsale.

He's acclaimed all over the world, yet remains virtually unheard of at home. More than half a century ago, he left these shores for Paris, as a fledgling writer. Ever since, he has honed his craft, been published prolifically, taught, translated, and educated, all while on a winding path through many lands. His life is a beautifully storied one, populated by incredible characters.

"There's no money in poetry!" he exclaims, wheeling in defiance at an imaginary foe. "My mother wanted me to consider a secure profession. I never argued. But I rejected that. With a monastic silence. Passively. Christianly," O'Grady grins, taking you into his confidence, and the subtleties of his ways.

Where his peers were stuck in comics, O'Grady was chasing black-listed books. "You couldn't get *Ulysses*. Joyce was banned," he says. "They feared for how it would influence your thinking. It could lead you into protest!" But literary prohibition only sharpened O'Grady's curiosity, inspiring him to solicit literature any which way he could.

"Robert Herbert, Limerick City librarian lent from his own private collection," O'Grady remembers. "I got my hands on TS Eliot,

Kavanagh ... and poets I couldn't even understand. Verlaine, Baudelaire ... Rimbaud." O'Grady's fate was sealed.

"James Joyce left. So I too had to. To go forth and encounter the reality of experience," he relays, "I moved to Paris as a teenager. Fresh from a boarding school existence in Roscrea, I had no idea of what I was going to do other than look for where the artists hung out, in the Latin quarter.

"George Whitman gave me a job in his bookstore, Shakespeare and Company," he says. "And I moved in. Sleeping upstairs. It was the only place for English literature in Paris. With writers passing through all the time. And George gave me the key. "Why did he take me in? I don't know. Maybe he thought I wasn't an eejit," O'Grady ponders, stalling for your reaction, "or if I was ... that I was the kind of eejit who was making it new. Ha. George was the one who told me about the Berlitz school, where I got my teaching start."

It was what Joyce had done. So, it appealed to the naive O'Grady. It allowed him to earn a crust and immerse himself in the city's artistic community. And very soon he was rubbing shoulders with the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Pablo Picasso and Samuel Beckett.

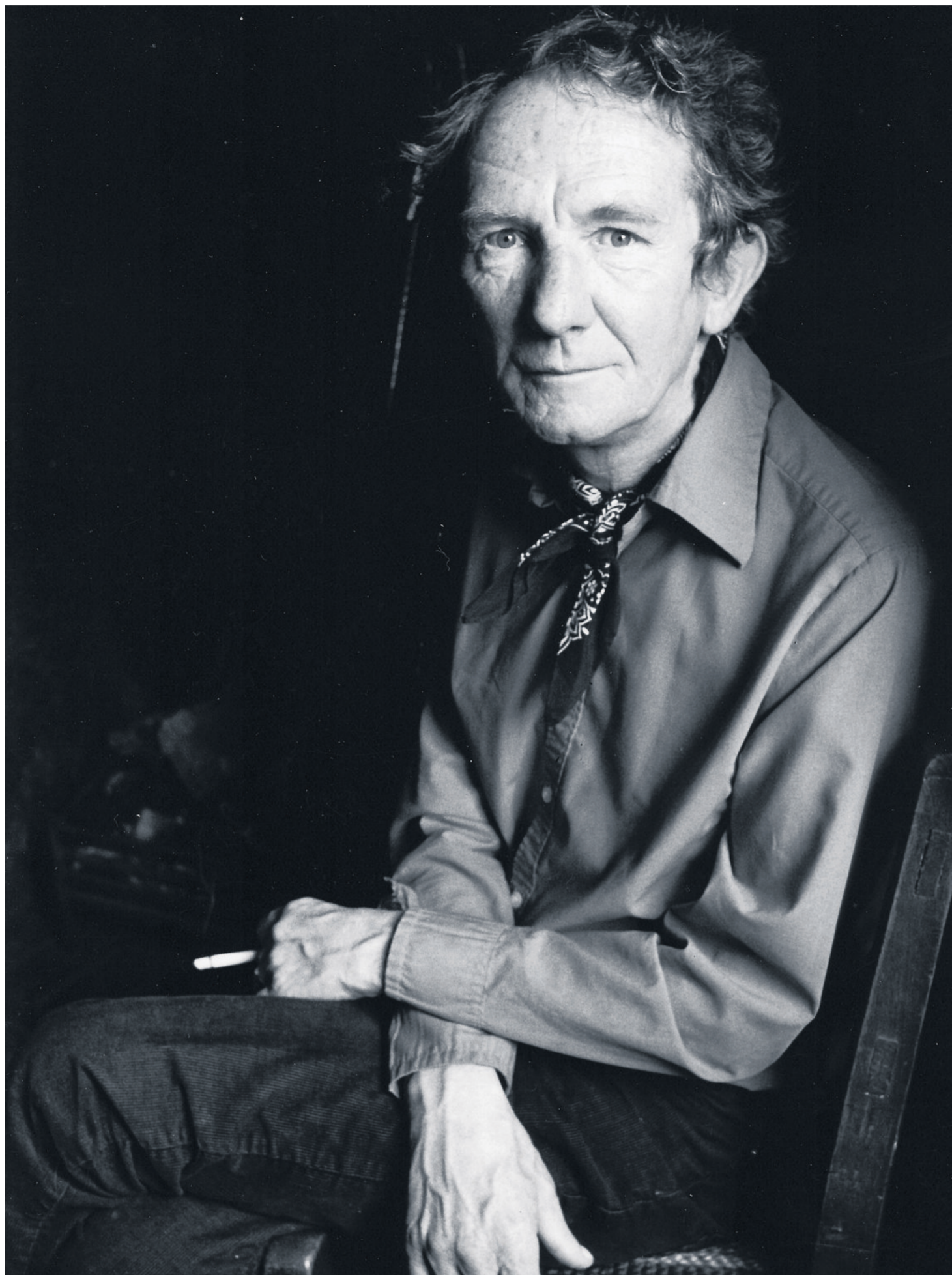
"Sartre was amused by me — this young Irish man — trying to meet with the 'reality of experience'. He was very polite and cordial," O'Grady recalls. "And Sam Beckett had just put on *Waiting for Godot*. I saw him as a high priest. He saw me as an acolyte."

As he regales, with sophisticated tales of a distant world, his hands circle through the air, orchestrating thoughts and conducting the flow. O'Grady is truly at home when channelling narrative streams.

"In Paris, they thought I was like Duffy's circus," he booms. "If I didn't know something, I would make it up." As the performance grows, you wonder what it would have been like to witness him teaching, lecturing, mentoring, even.

You also contemplate the lines you might be crossing as he navigates further into territory that reverberates with the echoes of legends — created and delivered by a master. Reclining into doubt, your eyes lift, only to be caught by the photographs on the wall.

Winking back at you, the innumerable shots of Desmond and his



**JOURNEY OF LIFE:** When asked of the lady alongside him in the movie 'La Dolce Vita', O'Grady confesses, 'Fellini also cast my mistress, Raffaella Pelligi. Ah, well, they do say, if you're going to love a Roman, love an aristocrat.' Portrait of O'Grady in the Spaniard pub by John Minihhan

literary and artistic heavyweight encounters, disabuse you of any notions of the fanciful. It's actually O'Grady's self-deprecation that belies his friendship with the icons of the time, in particular the maverick American poet Ezra Pound.

"I met my wife-to-be in Shakespeare and Company. Olga Jwaideh," O'Grady pauses, as if revisiting the very day, "she was an exiled Iraqi Catholic; spoke perfect English, and French too. Very sharp. We swapped poetry — her Arabic for my English."

It was no ordinary exchange. O'Grady would dedicate thereafter most of his creative life to translating world literature — almost 1,000 pages of specialist craft — rendering the voices of Arabic and Kurdish writers, amongst many others, accessible to wider audiences. All because he fell in love.

"Olga and I decided to leave Paris," he remembers. "And settle in Rome. We had a daughter, Deirdre. And Olga's mother and brother had fled Iraq to escape Catholic persecution. Their house had been burnt to the ground. It was a hellish place at the time. "I didn't have a word of Italian. Not a word," he laughs, eyes lighting, "save for my years of schoolboy latin." Undaunted and eager, he revelled in the culture of openness he met in the Eternal City. Before long he was finding his way into the drawing rooms and evenings of the aristocracy.

"I was teaching English so I could afford to write, translating Italian cinema, and socialising with the city's intellectual elite and its celebrities. And I was the voice of Pope Pius XII on Vatican

radio ... while living in the Jewish Quarter," he says, punctuating his memories and their ironies with oratorical precision.

That's just the way life rolled for O'Grady back then. The young Limerick man would become known to the American Beat writers travelling Europe, looking for their voice. And soon Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac would seek him out.

Of course, Federico Fellini caught wind of this young Joycean scholar, floating amongst Rome's intelligentsia, and he too sought his audience. The upshot of their meeting was a role in *La Dolce Vita* for O'Grady.

When asked of the lady alongside him in the movie, O'Grady confesses, "Fellini also cast my mistress, Raffaella Pelligi. Ah, well, they do say, if you're going to love a Roman, love an aristocrat." Did it spell the end of his marriage?

"No. Olga and I parted because she yearned for a life in the UK. She'd grown up with dreams of Oxford and Cambridge. I just couldn't go there," he explains. "It was an ideological thing. I just couldn't ... after stopping there long enough to pay my way to Paris."

And so O'Grady's Roman holiday ended: he bound for the US, his wife for a country in which he had no heart. Olga would become an integral member of the BBC World Service team covering Middle East Affairs, while Desmond's compass remained fixed elsewhere.

Their daughter, Deirdre, would follow in her mother's footsteps; she too establishing her journalistic credentials at the BBC, in the same field. Contact with

Desmond was long-distance. Yet still maintained. He would father other children, and maintain a similar role in their lives — mostly in correspondence.

It had been his means of opening doors to Beckett and Pound — befriending, learning, creating his own voice. So too for his family — it would be his way of being in their worlds, parsed by rare encounters. This was O'Grady. Veering off course couldn't be countenanced.

Literary critic and biographer Richard Ellmann had piqued O'Grady's academic curiosity when they met in Rome. And thus Harvard came into his sights. "They paid me. Oxford wouldn't," he chimes in vindication. "A poet must eat, and have something to show for it ... on typed paper."

The US may have brought a loving partner, a student of his from his Harvard days, and another child into his life, but it never offered him what he could find in his Mediterranean haunts or in the spells he would spend in Persia. A wandering Celt, he had no place to explore his origins state-side.

So, with a doctorate in his pocket, O'Grady took little time in relocating to the cultural hotbed of Egypt. "I was ahead of my own generation," he theorises, "in my own curious way. My contemporaries stayed in much safer confines. I spent most of my life abroad. An expatriate. Teaching, translating, writing. Doing. Eeking out ... the conscience of my race."

A phone rings in a back room. O'Grady disappears to answer it. Mumbling. And you sit, agog, staring at the books, manuscripts,

loose leaves, envelopes and paper clippings strewn around the table tops, chairs and shelves. All in a vaguely discernible order. Guarded by photographic sentries.

"The son of a student of mine, from when I was in Alexandria," he explains, "...called to tell me of the passing of his mother." Desmond takes a moment. And it all sinks in: he's remembering his days in that great city; the interviewer absorbing the impact his subject had on the lives of others.

Amid all the experiments to distill this elusive reality of experience: from late nights in Limerick, flanked by Richard Harris and Jack Donovan, to immersing himself in Eurasia, O'Grady is a rare creature.

He laid out a path; found people along the way who believed in his endeavours; and achieved his goal: to be true to his calling when the sacrifices were greatest. There were many women — episodic encounters with the muse. But on a solo journey, there were no strings attached.

Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney salutes him as as one of the standout figures in Irish literary life, applauding O'Grady's commitment to living selflessly for the art. Aosdana, the Irish Association of Artists, have honoured him. Among peers, he stands distinguished — elsewhere, almost unknown.

"Is it that time already?" O'Grady takes to his feet. He dons his coat, and invites his company to the nearby Spaniard pub. "Join me if you will," he says, angling for the door. If the conversation is to run, there's little choice but to follow. Some things never change.

## IF YOU DO ONE THING THIS WEEK



### FIND YOUR FEET in film

Filmbase and RTE are seeking Ireland's new filmmaking talent, and will support four short projects with funding worth up to €20,000. An information session will be held at Filmbase, in Temple Bar, on Thursday. [www.filmbase.ie/awards](http://www.filmbase.ie/awards)



### MUSE over nudes

The celebrated portrait painter James Hanley has turned his talents to nudes and hosts his first solo exhibition of the work, entitled 'One Day', at Solomon Fine Art, 15 St Stephen's Green, from Friday until March 10. [www.solomonfineart.ie](http://www.solomonfineart.ie)



### FOLLOW O'Flanagan

Author Sheila O'Flanagan launches her Quick Reads 2011 novel, 'Follow Me' in Eason, O'Connell Street, on Saturday. Quick Reads are ideal for adults new to reading or bite-sized tomes for regular readers. [quickreadsireland.com](http://quickreadsireland.com)



### WATCH the warriors

'Acallam na Senorach: An Irish Colloquy' by Tarik O'Regan, conducted by Paul Hillier, will be performed at this evening at the O'Reilly Theatre, Wexford Opera House. To book call: 053 912 2144 or go to: [www.wexfordopera.house.ie](http://www.wexfordopera.house.ie)



### NEGOTIATE No Romance

A new drama 'No Romance' directed by Wayne Jordan and starring among others Stephen Brennan, premieres on the Peacock Stage for a five week run. Tickets €13 - €25. Tel: 01 8787222 [www.abbeytheatre.ie](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie)

## BESTSELLERS

Order books with free P&P telephone 01 405 9100 or visit [www.independentbooks.ie](http://www.independentbooks.ie)

### PAPERBACK FICTION

- 1 The Brightest Star in the Sky** Marian Keyes, Penguin
- 2 Room** Emma Donoghue, Picador
- 3 Never Let Me Go** Kazuo Ishiguro, Faber & Faber
- 4 One Day** David Nicholls, Hodder Paperback
- 5 The Help** Kathryn Stockett, Penguin

### ORIGINAL FICTION

- 1 Belle** Lesley Pearce, Michael Joseph
- 2 Taboo** Casey Hill, Simon & Schuster
- 3 The Leopard** Jo Nesbo, Harvill Secker
- 4 Tick, Tock** James Patterson, Century
- 5 Mistaken** Neil Jordan, John Murray Publishers

### PAPERBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 Eat, Pray, Love** Elizabeth Gilbert, Bloomsbury
- 2 Committed: A Love Story** Elizabeth Gilbert, Bloomsbury
- 3 The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks** Rebecca Skloot, Pan Macmillan
- 4 127 Hours** Aron Ralston, Simon & Schuster
- 5 The Long Walk** Slavomir Rawicz, Constable & Robinson

### HARDBACK NON-FICTION

- 1 Jamie's 30-minute Meals** Jamie Oliver, Penguin
- 2 With Love, from Me...** Joseph Galliano, Transworld
- 3 One Direction: Forever Young** HarperCollins
- 4 Baking Made Easy** Lorraine Pascale, HarperCollins
- 5 Undisputed** Chris Jericho, Orion

### CHILDREN'S

- 1 Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules** Jeff Kinney, Penguin
- 2 I am Number Four** Pittacus Lore, Penguin
- 3 Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days** Jeff Kinney, Penguin
- 4 Diary of a Wimpy Kid** Jeff Kinney, Penguin
- 5 Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw** Jeff Kinney, Penguin

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