

# IF I WERE A BLACK BIRD



Exhibition begins: I'd Whistle and Sing 

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NATIONAL  
LIBRARY  
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# I'D WHISTLE AND SING

🎵 An exhibition on the lives of Delia Murphy and Thomas J Kiernan  
 Commemorating sixty years of Irish diplomatic representation in Australia  
 Taispeántas ar bheatha Delia Murphy agus Thomas J Kiernan  
 Comóradh trí scór bliain Ambasáid na hÉireann san Astráil

Thomas Joseph Kiernan was the first Irish ambassador to Australia, posted first as Minister Plenipotentiary and later as Ambassador. He travelled with his wife, Delia, and two of their children to Canberra, to take up his post on 6 November 1946. The then Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera, recognized that he was sending a diplomatic couple rather than a sole envoy: when he wrote to Australian Prime Minister Joseph Benedict (Ben) Chifley: 'Apart from his distinguished academic career Dr Kiernan is gifted with prudence and discretion and he and his wife universally popular.'

Delia Murphy was a singer of traditional Irish songs who flourished from the 1930s to the 1960s. 'As near to being a star as anyone in Ireland of the 1940s could claim,' she was a regular singer on **RADIO ÉIREANN** and made several records of songs that entered the national repertoire,

such as **THE SPINNING WHEEL**, **CONNAUGHT CRADLE SONG**, **THREE LOVELY LADIES FROM BARRICK**, and many more. Of her, singer Liam Clancy has said: 'I think her main contribution was that she made us feel we could respectably sing our own songs.'

In 1924, Delia Murphy married TJ Kiernan, economist, scholar and diplomat. He enjoyed a long career as Irish representative to the United Kingdom, the Vatican, Germany, Canada and the United States of America, as well as to Australia. Delia accompanied him on many of his missions and, where possible, she performed for small diplomatic groups and large audiences alike.

In telling the story of this remarkable couple who established the Irish Embassy in Canberra, this exhibition celebrates sixty years of Irish diplomatic representation in Australia.

Eit Thomas Joseph Kiernan céad ambasáidir na hÉireann san Astráil. Thairní sé go Canberra, in amnach leis a bhean chéile, Delia, agus mar agus mair, chun dul i mbun a phost ar an 6 Samhain 1946. Dúirt an Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera, gur léinn díplómataic a bhí a chéir amach air: nuair a scríobh sé chuig Taoiseach na hAstráile, Joseph Benedict Chifley: 'Apart from his distinguished academic career Dr Kiernan is gifted with prudence and discretion and he and his wife universally popular.'

Ceadóir amháin traidisiúnta eile ar Delia Murphy a bhain cuid amach sa tréimh léir na tréimh úd agus na seanscáil. Dúirt sí faoi go raibí sí 'As near to being a star as anyone in the Ireland of the 1940s could claim.' Ba mionc í le clois ar **RADIO ÉIREANN** agus rinne sí roinnt amháin a tháinig i le comhach **RTE**. Píosa is ea í ar an 6 nóiméad ar phobal a chéir, **THE SPINNING WHEEL**, **CONNAUGHT CRADLE SONG**, **THREE LOVELY LADIES FROM BARRICK**, agus go leor eile.

Faoi mar a dúirt Liam Clancy ina tuairim: 'I think her main contribution was that she made us all feel we could respectably sing our own songs.'

Sa bhliain 1924 pósaí Delia Murphy ar Thomas J Kiernan, eacnamaí, staraí agus taidhleoir. Chait sí TJ Kiernan blianta fada leis an ambasáidreacht. Eit sé na Stáit Aontuisc, na Chéiméil, i gCeanada agus i Stáit Aontuisc Mheiriceá, agus an Astráil. Bhí sí Delia leis tharbh agus a chéir eile. Cé go raibí sí eil cáimail an chéir traidisiúnta le hinne air ar an goipríoch. Bhí sí leis arís arís arís amháin a sé go pobal leis féin, chomh maith.

Dúirt sí ar an trí scór bliain d'ambasáid traidisiúnta Éireannach san Astráil a chomhach na taispeántas seo, de réir mar a rinne sí arís arís arís amháin a chéir reamhghrá.



- 1 Delia Murphy (c.1930s)
- 2 Bust of the 21st and 22nd Irish Ambassadors, Delia Murphy and Thomas J. Kiernan, by Barry Keogh, 1994.
- 3 Map of Delia Murphy in 1946
- 4 Dr Thomas J. Kiernan (Canberra, 1946)
- 5 Delia Murphy, TJ Kiernan, and others, at the opening of an art exhibition, Melbourne, 1948.
- 6 Irish ambassador sending of record to Delia Murphy in 1946



# 1897 1924

## Dublin Mayo Galway

TJ Kierman was born in Dublin in 1897 and Delia Murphy in Ardara, Co Mayo, in 1902. Delia's parents were Jack Murphy and Anna Agnes Murphy (née Fleming). Jack Murphy was a Mapoman who had been successful as a gold and silver prospector in the Klondike, Canada, and Leadville, Colorado, during the 1890s. He and his wife returned to Ireland and soon after Delia's birth he bought **MOUNT DENISON HOUSE**, Hollymount, Co Mayo where she spent her childhood.

Delia was a lively child, who always liked to sing. When very young she befriended local traveller children and learned some of their songs. She attended the local national school, and subsequently went on a boarder to **PROVISIONAL CONVENT, TOWN AND DOMINIC CONVENT, COLES STREET, DUBLIN**. In 1919 she began to study commerce at **UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, GALWAY**, and graduated with a BA in 1923.

During her last year at college she met TJ Kierman, a tax inspector in Galway. He had been a pupil of **ST MARY'S COLLEGE, BATHINERY**, and was a graduate of **UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN**. They married in 1924.

**1** **Green-Clay-Kerridge**  
Jack Murphy, Delia Murphy (left) and TJ Kierman in the Emerald Gold Rush in 1898. He was married to a Canadian, Charlotte, who he married for what with success. There he met Anna Fleming. The married and returned to Ireland in 1901. A year later Delia was born.

**2** **Mount Denison House, Hollymount, Clontarf, Co Mayo**  
Two years after Delia's birth in 1902, Jack Murphy bought Mount Denison House, a substantial Georgian house on a large farm, from Charles Young. Delia's childhood was spent in this house, which remained in the Murphy family until the 1990s. It was later demolished.

**3** **St. Mary's, Clontarf, Co Mayo**  
at the top of the century (European photo)

**4** **Cumhailte National School, Hollymount, Clontarf, Co Mayo, 1908**  
Delia is seated in the front row, 2nd from the right. Her younger brother Dublin is third from the right. Just now she was a pupil at Cumhailte School from 1906 to 1911. She had to take a walk of two or two and a half miles to get to the school each day. Delia later reported:

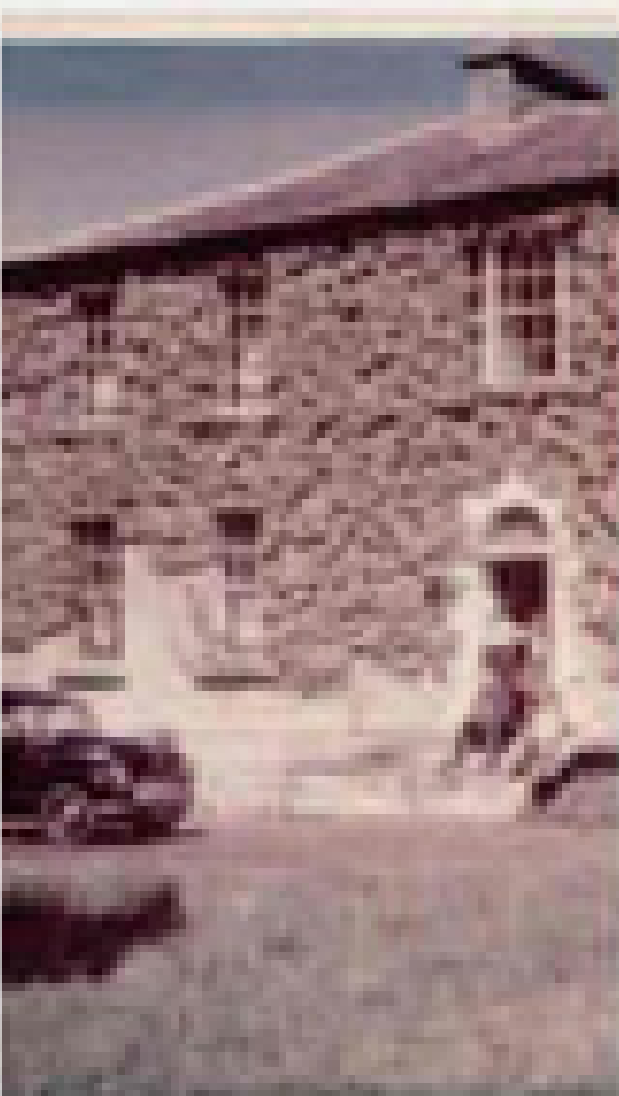
**5** **Teacher at Cumhailte** 1910 photo (TJ Kierman Delia Delia Centre for Irish Politics, UCD)

**6** **Delia's school, Cumhailte** c. 1910 photo (European Photo Delia Delia Centre for Irish Politics, UCD)

**7** **The smaller Delia's house** (1907-10) one of the greatest Irish stone houses (Delia Delia Centre for Irish Politics, UCD)

### Delia's Days in Mayo, U.K. & L.

An evening in 1902, Delia was introduced to a boy, Thomas Kierman, who was a member of the travelling community. She found comfort in his familiar face as Jack Murphy left. Thomas joined the travelling community and sang and Delia had to go to the temple and work in the travelling community. It is possible that some songs in her repertoire were originally learned from Thomas Kierman and his family.



**8** **Dominic Convent, Dublin Street, 1919 (Delia Delia Delia Centre)**  
Delia attended the Provisional Convent, Town, Co Galway, and from 1917 to 1919 was a pupil at Dominican Convent, Dublin Street, Dublin, a school with a strong academic and musical reputation. She was in the choir for several years. Her traditional solo was not highly regarded in Dublin Street, which caused the Kierman sisters, Margaret and Delia, coming to your people. Later Delia became friendly with Margaret Burke Sheridan.

**9** **Thomas J Kierman**  
Thomas J Kierman was born in Dublin in 1897. He attended St. Mary's College, Bathinery and University College Dublin. In 1916, a few weeks before the Easter Rising, he joined the Gaelic League as a clerk. He advanced rapidly and in 1921, ten months after the suppression of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in January 1922, was appointed Inspector of Taxes in Galway City. A gifted student, he was at this point working on a doctoral thesis on economics. In 1923 his first book, *British War Finance and the Commonwealth* had been published in London, and in 1924 a *Study on National Finance* was published by the Talbot Press in Dublin - the first of several books on a variety of subjects by him.

**10** **Department of Finance, Delia, Martha and Thomas J Kierman, Galway, 1920**  
Delia and Thomas became engaged in 1920 and were married in Dublin, at the chapel of University College, St. Stephen's Green.

**11** **University College, Galway, c. 1916**  
**Leona's Collection**  
Delia was a student at University College Galway, Annagh-Quinn College and was National University of Ireland Galway between 1917 and 1923. She graduated as a Bachelor of Commerce in 1923, one of a class of eight.



# 1924-1945

## London Dublin Rome

Thomas J Kerrigan was appointed secretary to the Irish High Commissioner in London on 22 April 1924. He and Delia lived in Stoveham in London for ten years, from 1925-35. During this period their four children were born. Thomas worked on his PhD and was awarded a doctorate by **UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON** in 1940. He was instrumental in setting up the **NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND CLUB** in 1928, a dining club for graduates of **NUI** which became an important focal point for Irish social and cultural events in London.

As well as working in the home, Delia assisted her husband in his social duties. She sang at diplomatic gatherings and salons' parties and became friendly with many Irish celebrities, including John McCormack.

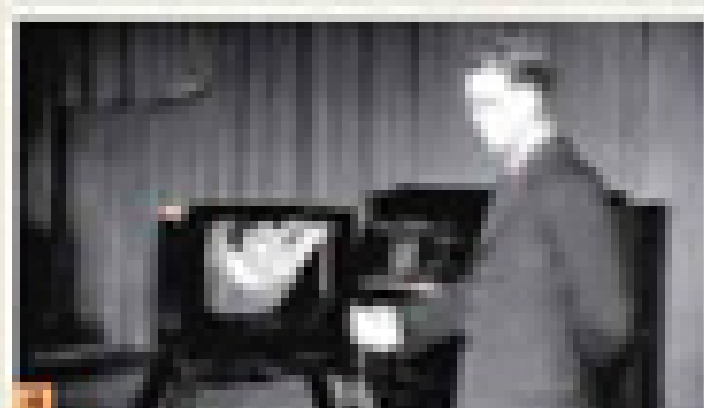
In 1935 the family returned to Ireland and lived in a rented house at 32 Elgin Road, Ballsbridge. Thomas was appointed Director of Broadcasting at **RADIO IRELAND**. Delia made her first record with **NUI**, who were setting up a studio in Waterford, in 1935. During the following six years, Delia sang frequently on **RADIO IRELAND**. She also performed on the stage all over the country and made several records for **NUI**. During this period Delia became established as a singer and her fame expanded rapidly.

On 14th October 1941, however, it was announced that Thomas J Kerrigan was to be appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to the **VATICAN**. Delia, who was at the peak of her career as a singer, had to abandon it in order to take up the role of hostess at the Irish Embassy at the Vatican.

The posting lasted until the end of the War in 1945. The Kerrigans were a popular diplomatic family and their Thursday 'at home' at the legation at San Martino della Battaglia were extremely popular. Delia was renowned as a charming and generous hostess. Those who stayed the legation during the dark days of the War report that her kindness gave them hope and comfort.

During their stay in Rome the Kerrigans met, among others, Mussolini, Roosevelt, and Pope Pius XII, whose biography T.J. Kerrigan wrote. Delia became friendly with Edda Mussolini, Mussolini's daughter. She was also friendly with Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, who helped thousands of Allied Prisoners of War to escape from Italy. Delia Murphy, and Bláthnaise, her daughter, were occasional active members of Monsignor O'Flaherty's underground network. After the War, the British government wished to decorate Delia in recognition of her bravery but she decided not to accept the decoration.

Dr Kerrigan's appointment to the Vatican ended in 1945.



- 1 Delia and T.J. and probably John Bláthnaise (1922). During their ten years in London, four children were born to Delia and Thomas: Bláthnaise (1924), Ailish Phionnula (1926), Colin (1930) and Orlaith (1935).
- 2 Delia, T.J., Bláthnaise and Ailish, c. 1928
- 3 Queen John McCormack. Delia met John McCormack at a party at the NUI Club in London, and according to her own account sang a version of the famous traditional song 'The Shan' for him. T.J. Kerrigan had been one of those who founded the NUI Club, among other well-known people who attended the club were W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Liam O'Flaherty and Sean O'Casey.
- 4 Radio Ireland. Radio Ireland was established in 1926. In 1937 T.J. Kerrigan was recruited from London and asked to take up the position of Director of Broadcasting, a post which he held until 1940. During this period Delia was a regular contributor to programmes such as 'The Irishman's Club' music show and 'In other words' sponsored programme. The photograph shows Seamus Heaney, the first Radio Ireland presenter in a recording studio, probably located in Denmark Street, 110A Denmark Street, where the radio station was first housed.
- 5 Delia, Bláthnaise, Ailish Phionnula, Orlaith and Colin, 1936. In 1937 'Lullie Thom', of 1926, heard Delia singing at a meeting of 1926, the women's association. He was impressed and invited Delia to a recording session. She set up a studio at the NUI studio at 32 Elgin Road, 32 Elgin Road, London, probably in 1938. Here Delia made her first records. The records had a dozen songs, including 'I'm a Whiffler', 'The Irishman's Club' and 'The Spinning Wheel'. They were an instant success.
- 6 **NUI** Club, c. 1928
- 7 **NUI** Club, c. 1928
- 8 **Radio Ireland**, c. 1937
- 9 Delia and T.J. and probably John Bláthnaise (1922). During their ten years in London, four children were born to Delia and Thomas: Bláthnaise (1924), Ailish Phionnula (1926), Colin (1930) and Orlaith (1935).
- 10 The period 1935-1941, which the Kerrigan family spent in Dublin, was one of the most productive of Delia's career: she made many records, published dozens of songs, performed on the radio and stage, took part in a film, and also began to write fiction. In 1939 'The Lullabyer' journal published her short story 'Western Journey'.
- 11 The 'Irishman... at the Shan' film. In 1939, Delia was invited to play a role in a film which was made on the Great War. 'Shan' of the coast of Lerry. The film was written by David O'Connell.
- 12 Delia, Bláthnaise (1924) (Photo: Capucine Arnold)
- 13 Delia, Bláthnaise (1924) and Colin (1930). Delia Murphy was a household name in Ireland. Bláthnaise, sponsor of a long-running popular radio show on Radio Ireland, and music publisher, published many songs sung or written by Delia during the period. There is some confusion about the authorship of some of the songs attributed to Delia: many were her versions of traditional songs or songs written by others. Some, however, were undoubtedly her own.
- 14 Delia, Orlaith, and her unpublished cousin in the garden of St. Peter's Augustine, Thomas's home. The Kerrigan were frequent visitors to the Augustine house, the pair of which was Father Tom Kearney, Father Kearney was one of those who, like Delia, helped people on the run from the Nazis.
- 15 Queen John McCormack. T.J. Kerrigan was appointed Irish ambassador to the Vatican in 1941. The family moved to Rome and lived there until 1945 - a time which afforded Delia an opportunity to put on and to be the first phase of Delia's singing career. In June 1942 she had a private audience with Pope Pius XII, whom T.J. came to attend and whose biography he wrote. The photograph shows Delia, Delia, Orlaith, Monsignor Thomas Bern, Colin, Thomas and Bláthnaise, with her twin cousins.



# 1946-1950

## Australia

On 1 March, 1946, T.J. Kiernan was appointed Irish envoy to Australia, he was the first Irish ambassador to that country. For the following eight years he represented Ireland in Australia. In addition, he was the only Irish diplomatic representative in the whole of Asia.

On 14 September, 1946, after a long sea voyage, the Kiernan family arrived in Perth. They moved on to the capital Canberra, where they lived in a hotel for almost two years until a residence for the ambassador was built.

As in the Vatican, the Kiernan couple proved popular and Delia's warm personality and skill as a hostess were much appreciated.

During his period of office T.J. often accompanied by Delia, travelled all over Australia meeting Irish groups in every major town and city. Delia sometimes sang at these meetings, but her formal career as a singer was still on hold.

In 1948 Delia returned to Ireland where she stayed for some years, concentrating once again, for the last time, on her own career. Dr Kiernan was appointed to a second term as Irish ambassador to Australia and remained in Canberra until 1954, during which time he wrote an important history of the Irish in Australia, *THE IRISH (1842) IN AUSTRALIA* (Dublin, 1954).

1 Delia, T.J. Kiernan and colleagues, in the garden of 75 number's house in Ballsbridge, Dublin, c. 1946.

2 Delia, T.J. Kiernan and colleagues c. 1946, during office in Australia.

3 Delia and her family in Canberra, Australia. In 1947 the Kiernan family moved from their hotel accommodation into a rented property close to The Lodge, the Prime Minister's residence. Here they remained for a while. Delia was famous for having her own, a famous Australian style of party not embraced in the embassy circles and her arrival.

4 Delia and her family in Canberra, Australia. A purpose-built Irish embassy and Kiernan's residence in 1948. They are situated on 20 Wilson Street, Canberra. Kiernan's residence had diplomatic representation were housed in a series of rental properties in Canberra.

5 Kiernan, Dr. Kiernan in Australia. In June 1948, Kiernan, Dr. Kiernan and Frank Kiernan paid an official visit to Australia.

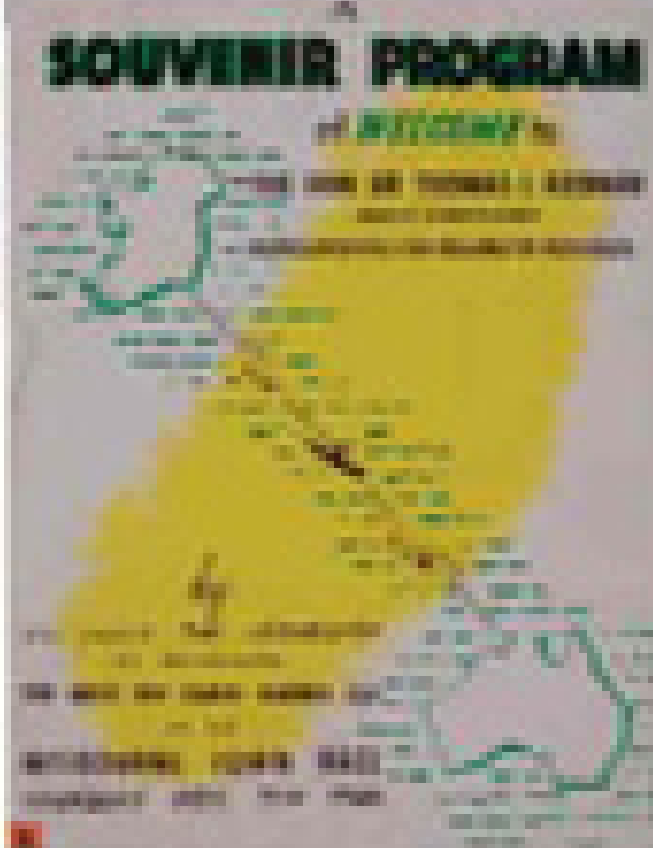
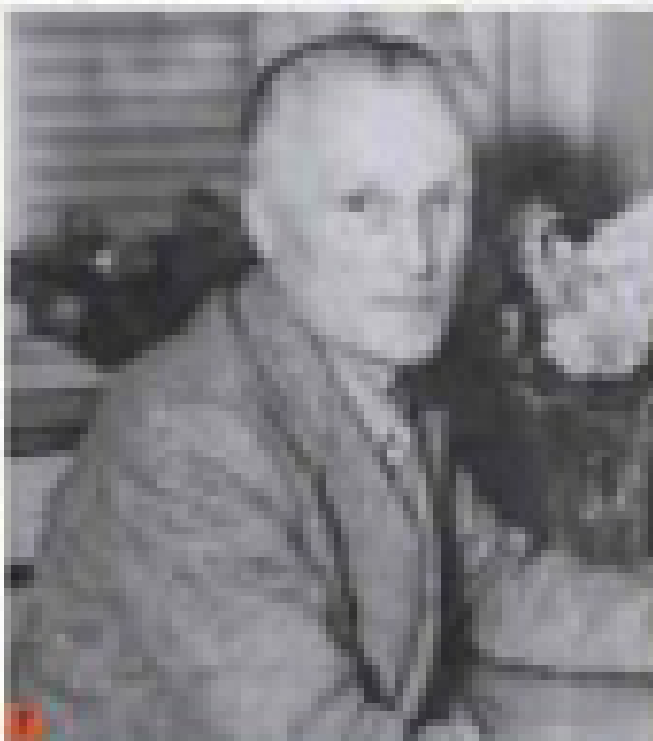
6 Delia and Kiernan Dr. Kiernan. Delia during afternoon tea in the kitchen of a residence in Canberra, 1948.

7 T.J. Kiernan at his desk in the Irish embassy in Canberra.

8 Programme commemorating various occasions held by the Embassy. Kiernan, Dr. Kiernan, Dr. Kiernan at Melbourne at Melbourne Town Hall, 27 November, 1946. T.J. delivered a speech detailing Irish contributions to England and Ireland and Delia sang to numerous applause providing a 'lunar' luncheon in a Melbourne newspaper 'The Observer' 'Who finds the show'.

9 Delia singing. Although Delia did not pursue her singing career in Australia, she often sang at parties and other engagements.

10 Delia at St. Patrick's College, Canberra, where her own work was being studied. She is photographed in the school's very noble uniform, 1948.



# 1950-1954

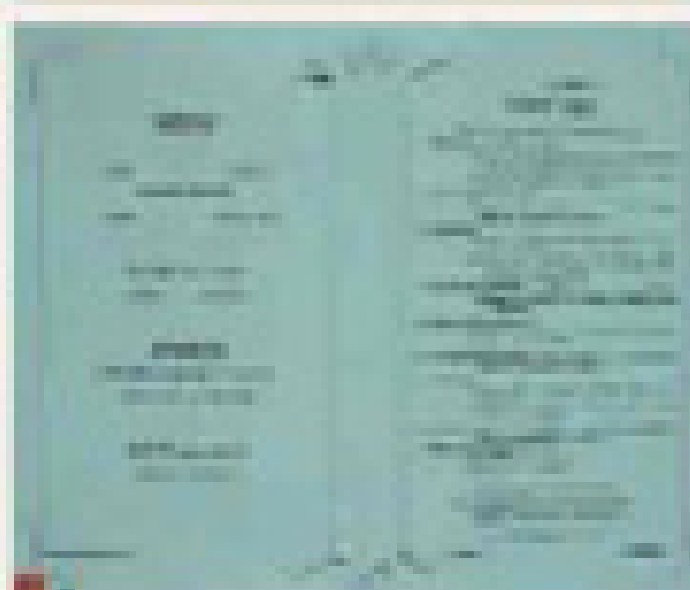
## Australia (continued)

In 1950 Delia Thomas and their daughter Orlaith returned to Ireland. When her husband went back to Australia for a second term, which lasted until 1954, Delia stayed at home. She concentrated on her own career and for the next four years sang at venues all over Ireland and Great Britain, and made many records.

Meanwhile, T.J. Kiernan sought to raise the profile of the Irish transported to Australia, and to emphasise the Australian role in the quest for Irish independence. He wrote: 'The story of the ships that came to Australia laden with convicts is part of the pride of Irish history. Sydney and Hobart and Fremantle mean 1790 and 1848 and 1867. It is for that that Sydney has its 1790

memorial monument, on which I unveiled in April 1947 the names of the executed leaders of 1916.'

T.J. Kiernan has been described as a 'successful image-maker' who 'sought to inform Australia on all aspects of Irish affairs, but particularly scholarship and the arts. To this end he lectured widely on Irish culture and history, presented Irish books to public libraries and made significant original contributions himself to the study of the history of the Irish in Australia.'

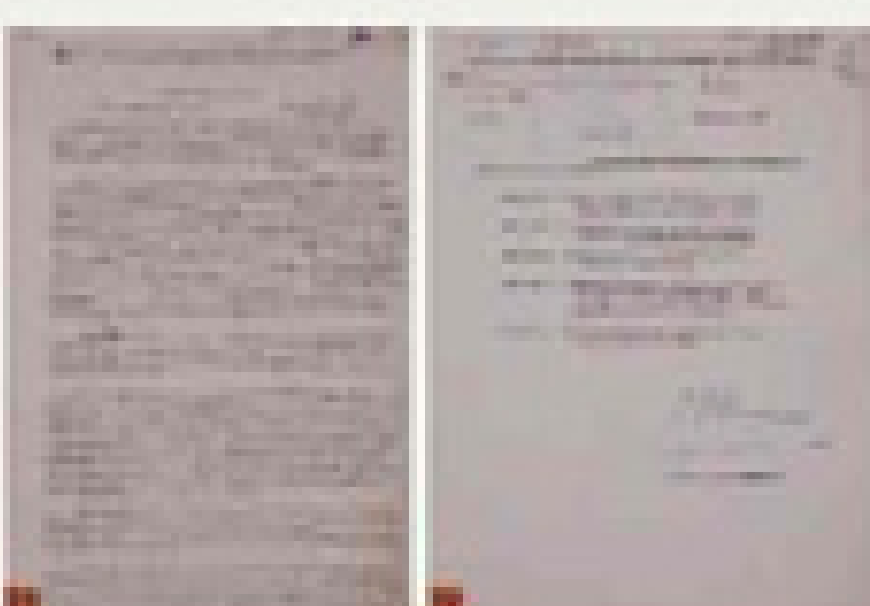


### Local Businesses

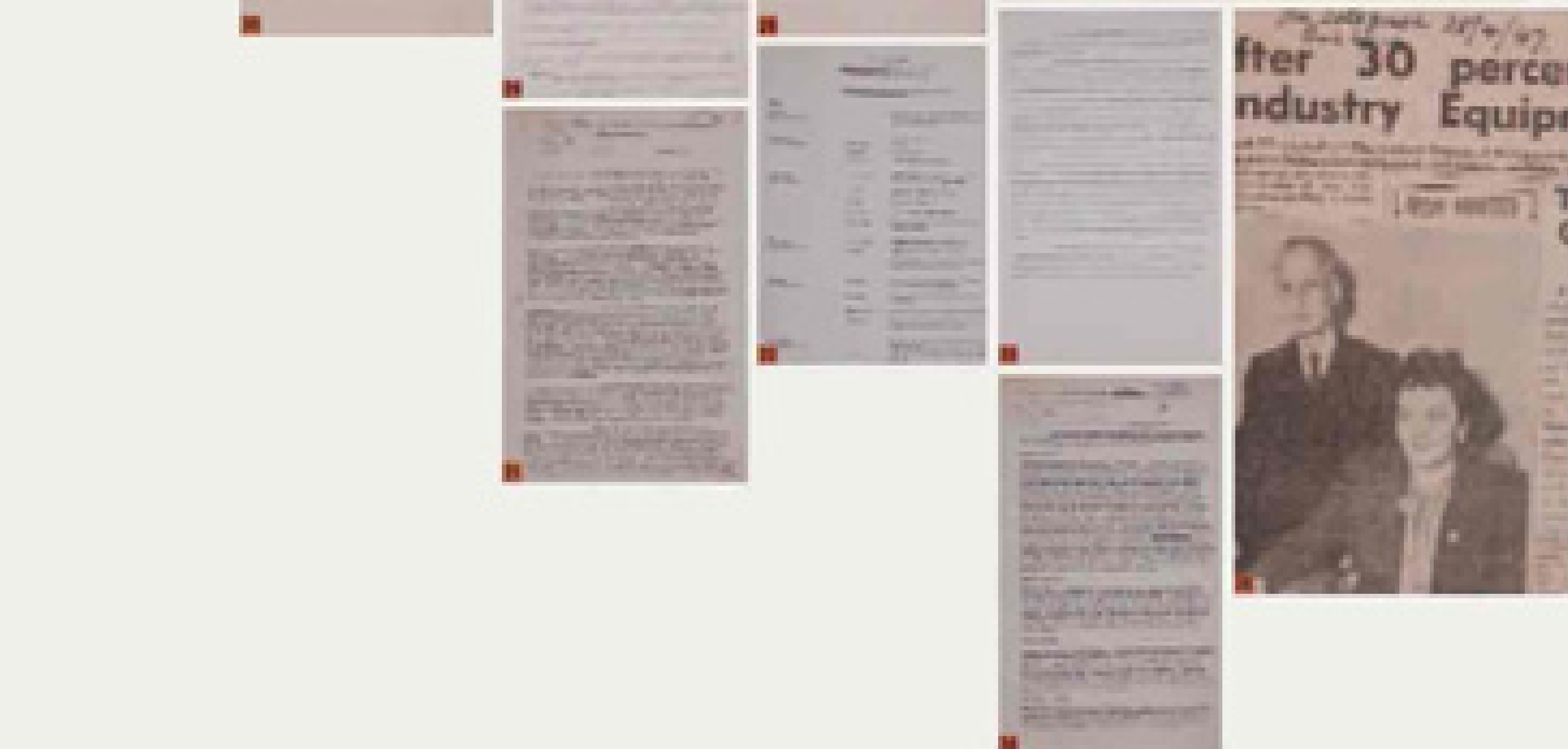
The Kiernan memorial supports and also inscribed all our records, many of the major ones as well as many smaller items. The selection of concert programmes, album covers and other ephemera indicates the role of these social events.

### Music, Events & Celebrations

T.J. Kiernan was renowned as a diligent and conscientious ambassador for many Irish-style events and activities in the Department of External Affairs in Dublin, relating to almost every aspect of current affairs in Australia and also in 1948.



IRISH AMBASSADORS TO AUSTRALIA	
Mr. E. Egan, Ambassador September 1949 - December 1950	Mr. Denis O'Riordan, Ambassador 29 January 1971 - 16 December 1981
Mr. Leo Marshall, Chargeur December 1949 - December 1951	Mr. Joe Gould, Ambassador 28 November 1960 - February 1961
Mr. William B. Kelly, Chargeur March 1951 - December 1952	Mr. Leo Walsh, Ambassador 29 February 1967 - 22 August 1969
Mr. Leo Kenny, Chargeur January 1953 - October 1962	Mr. Martin Kelly, Ambassador 21 September 1969 - 22 July 1981
Mr. Leo MacWhirter, Ambassador 23 May 1964 - 16 October 1967	Mr. Richard O'Keefe, Ambassador 24 July 1981 - 7 August 2007
Mr. John Dwyer, Ambassador 23 August 1967 - 11 March 1969	Mr. Declan Kelly, Ambassador 1 September 2007 - 1 September 2008
Mr. Thomas Kelly, Ambassador 29 April 1969 - 11 May 1971	Special Consul General 1 October 2008 to date
Mr. Dermot Walsh, Ambassador 22 July 1971 - 26 December 1973	



Exhibition continues: 1955-1964

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# 1955 1964

Germany Canada USA Ireland

In 1955 T.J. Kiernan was appointed Irish Ambassador to Germany and Delia accompanied him to Bonn. He was appointed Ambassador to Canada in 1957 and his last posting was to the United States of America in 1960. Delia resumed her role as diplomatic hostess and there was little time for her singing career. Her last recording, **THE QUEEN OF CONNEMARA**, was made in New York in 1961.

T.J. Kiernan developed a close friendship with the President of the United States of America, J.F. Kennedy. He was deeply involved in the organisation of President Kennedy's state visit to Ireland in 1963. After his retirement in 1964 he helped establish the Ireland America Foundation. He died in Ireland in 1967.

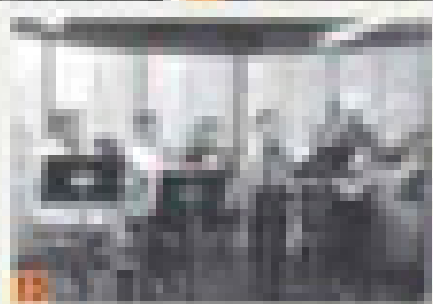
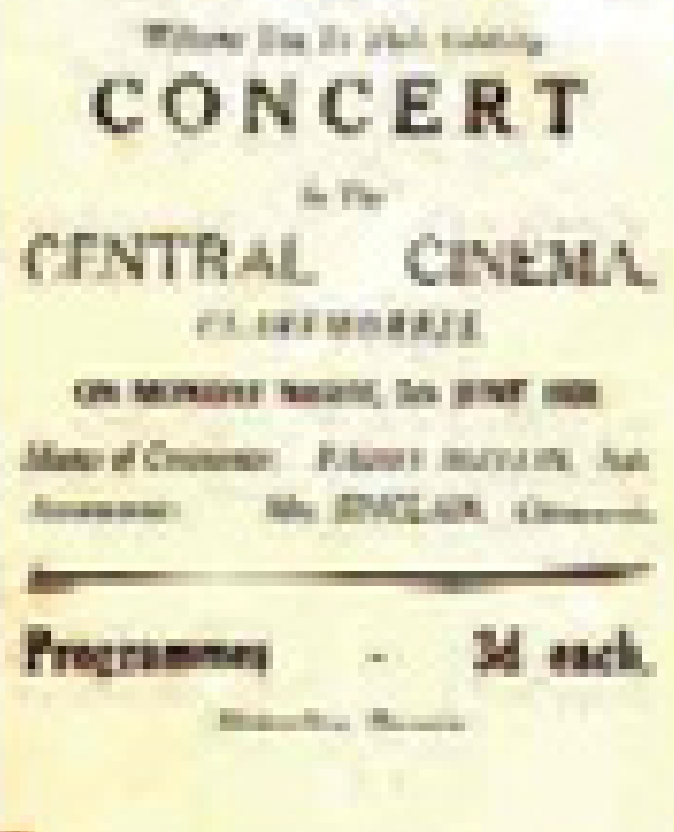
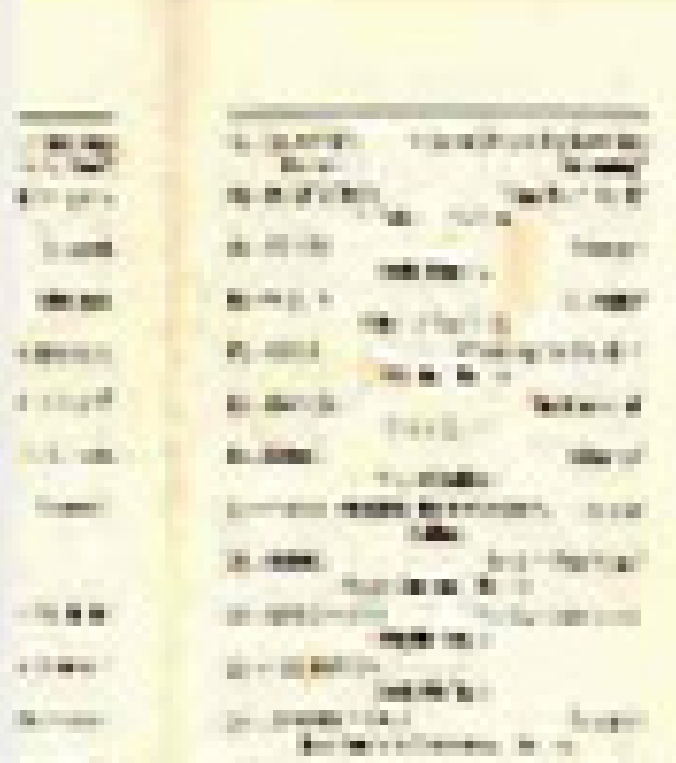
Delia lived on a farm in Ontario Canada until 1969 when she returned to Ireland to **LEAGHOGH COTTAGE** in the Strawberry Beds, Dublin.

Early in 1971 she was interviewed by Gay Byrne on the popular Irish television programme, **THE LATE LATE SHOW**. This was the first time that a mass Irish audience had the opportunity to see her. It was also the last time. A month later, in February 1971, she died unexpectedly.

T.J. Kiernan and Delia Murphy had an abiding love of Ireland. During their diplomatic postings they offered a fresh vision of Ireland to the world. Delia, through her music and T.J. in his writing, lecturing and diplomacy, devoted their lives to the promotion of Ireland and Irish culture abroad. They can be counted among those who shaped the international image of modern Ireland.

- 1 On 7 June 1962 Delia performed in a gala fund raising concert in her home town, Clonsilla, Co. Mon. This was the start of her second flowering as a singer and performer.
- 2 Expenses for the St. Colman's concert, 1958.
- 3 Delia advertising a performance in Palmer.
- 4 Delia from a poster, Ontario, Canada.
- 5 Delia at a St. Patrick's Day reception at the Irish Embassy in Gillingham, Bonn, 1956.
- 6 During the period 1959-63, Delia spent considerable time in Ireland and visited often.
- 7 T.J. Kiernan with President Kennedy when he received his guests of honor during his visit to Ireland. The picture was prepared and signed by the Chief Herald, Sir Gerard Moran, of the National Library of Ireland.
- 8 T.J. Kiernan signs the Student Book, St. Mary's, 1961, also in the photograph are Brian Black (Irish Embassy) and W. Gerald Harman, ICA's first secretary of state.
- 9 President John F. Kennedy is greeted by Delia in Clonsilla town, 1961. During his visit Delia was invited to give the welcome. T.J. Kiernan was heavily involved in organizing this visit.

- 10 John F. Kennedy meets his guests Mrs. Miley West in Clonsilla town, Co. Mon., 1961.
- 11 A recording session for a radio programme broadcast by RTÉ, 1960.
- 12 Delia with John O'Hara and Joe O'Donnell produced a documentary on the life of Delia Murphy, *The Ballad of Delia Murphy*, which was broadcast on RTÉ.
- 13 Delia singing with The Children in Clonsilla. In a television programme made by RTÉ, May 1968. The Children was a group which included John and Joan O'Hara, Alan Carter, Sam McLoe, Sean Thomas, Jim O'Connell, who hosted the RTÉ programme. It also in the photograph.



# WELL SO NOW TO CONCLUDE I GIVE THANKS

## Acknowledgements

This exhibition was devised by the  
**National Library of Ireland, 2007**  
Exposition catholique de  
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2007

Catholúic Naisantas Ára na hÉireann  
agáir d'áras na n-Éireann na n-Éireann  
na n-Éireann, na n-Éireann na n-Éireann  
na n-Éireann na n-Éireann na n-Éireann

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Tánaie Chloí Dúibhe Éireann  
**The Irish Traditional Music Archive**  
Cultúr Éireann  
**Culture Ireland**

Clair Uí Chléirín  
**The Keenan Family**  
Cairé Keenan agus an tOllamh  
Cáiré Keenan  
Cairé Keenan  
Leo Cullen  
Dáirde agus Dónalad Cairé  
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Ráibe Ní Fhlóirín, Cumann  
Eithne Éireann  
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