RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Even on Days when it Rains

Julia O'Donnell

Contents

Even on Days when it Rains

A True Story of Hardship and Maternal Love

JULIA O'DONNELL
with Eddie Rowley

To my darling husband Francie

A note from Daniel

LISTENING TO HER stories through my life, I always felt that my mother had a great book in her, and I have been encouraging her for many years to put pen to paper.

When she finally decided to write her story, I was delighted to see her set about the task with enthusiasm and passion. It provided many fruitful hours for my mother during the last two years as she documented an extraordinary life, from a poverty-stricken background to the glitz of show business.

I really feel there is no generation that will ever see change like my mother's. She was born in 1919 and has lived through so much. It would be a shame if that little bit of history went to the grave with her, as it has done with so many other wonderful characters.

Today it's hard to imagine just how primitive her early life was on the island of Owey, where she went barefoot as a child and grew up without electricity and all the mod cons we take for granted today. But it is a background rich in experiences and the traditions of a bygone age, as you will discover. Despite the hardship of their lifestyle, Owey people were enterprising, self-sufficient and a happy, close-knit community.

Later in her life, my mother had to face unimaginable personal heartbreak when my father died while still in his 40s. There were five children and we were all young.

My mother never got over my father's death. She misses him even to this day. But she put her own pain aside to ensure that we didn't suffer in any way. She sacrificed

everything for us – her whole life was her family. Personally, my mother was everything to me – she was a mother and a father. Never ever did I feel a sense of missing anything in my life.

My mother wanted her family to go on and live as well as we could. She encouraged me to follow my dream, and she was always there in the background praising me. She's very, very supportive – even to this day.

I really appreciate everything that my mother has done for me and our family. And I am delighted that she has lived to see us do well in our lives – all of us, including the grandchildren; she's a very hands-on woman in their lives too.

It's good to see her enjoy the finer things in life these days, and it gives me great pleasure to see her share in my success, just as she did with Margaret. The people who come to see me love to see her at my shows, and she enjoys the bit of fuss they make of her.

So, Mother, thank you for all that you've done through the years for me. I'm just thankful that you have been able to enjoy my success, and please God you'll make it to a hundred.

Daniel O'Donnell, 2006

A note from Margo

IT WAS WITH great pleasure that I accepted the request to add a few words as a tribute to my mother in her book of memories. I could write for ever about this woman who is my mother, but I will keep it as short as possible. She and she alone knows how I feel about her.

My mam has stood the test of time, and we have come through a lot together. It hasn't always been plain sailing and we didn't always see eye to eye, but as I look back I think we have done okay.

I helped Mam (when Dad died) to look after the family, and I know she hasn't forgotten that. Life was lonely for her when she lost Dad, but she put all her energy into her family and did a great job.

My mother is a very strong woman; the trials of life have made her that way. She has a lot of history in her memories, and I'm so glad she is sharing them with everyone. Recently I was in Branson, Missouri, USA, where my brother Daniel was performing. He invited me up to sing on numerous occasions, and one day while speaking of Mam (as he always does) he told the audience that our mother runs the whole show from her chair in the corner. He was of course speaking of the great interest she takes in each one of our lives, and I know that keeps her so young at heart. Good luck with your book, Mam, and long may you reign.

Margo, 2006

chapter one

The Albert Hall

DRESSED SMARTLY IN a black suit, a crisp white shirt and a red tie, Joe Collum was standing in the doorway. ‘Your carriage awaits you, Julia,’ he announced with a big smile.

‘Ah, would you get away out of that, Joe, and stop your trick-acting,’ I chided.

Joe laughed.

This quiet-mannered, dark-haired man has been a member of our extended family for so long he’s like another son to me.

‘Do you need any help with anything?’ he asked.

‘Sure what would I need help with, and me only taking a handbag. After all, isn’t it to the ball you’re taking me?’ I said.

He laughed again and led me to the hotel lift; we were heading for the car waiting outside.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the spacious people-carrier as Joe drove confidently along the side streets, I marvelled at how he could find his way around this big city of London with the bright lights of cars coming at us from all directions … and he a native of my own quiet little corner of Ireland.

We arrive at our destination, the Royal Albert Hall, and it’s like a busy airport with people racing around inside and out.

‘It’s a full house tonight, Julia,’ Joe announced.

‘Daniel will be delighted.’

‘Oh, he will surely.’

Growing up on the tiny, little-known island of Owey off County Donegal on the Northwest coast of Ireland, this was never in my dreams.

Taking my seat among the colourful audience, I see men and women from all walks of life, their faces alight with excitement in anticipation of the evening’s entertainment.

They’re all turned out in their Sunday best. Suddenly my mind is racing with so many memories.

All dolled up in my new blue dress and matching jacket, with shiny black shoes and a handbag that came all the way from Tenerife, I can’t help but think how my life today is so far removed from my teenage and early adult years when I earned a wage doing hard labour picking potatoes in the fields of Scotland and gutting fish in ports far from home. Earlier this evening, as I was preparing for tonight’s concert in a comfortable room of a really lovely London hotel, my thoughts wandered back to the times I slept in a cowshed at the end of a day’s slave labour, the smell of the animals filling the air. A shiver runs down my spine as I recall the horrible ‘visitors’ we experienced in our sleeping quarters one night.

What a difference tonight’s room was with its big, comfy bed, central heating, luxurious red carpet, modern wallpaper and lovely English landscapes, and all kinds of mod cons that left me baffled as to what their uses were. It was another world.

It’s all so different today. So many blessings to be grateful for. Though tonight I’m reminded of a tragic event from which I will never recover. I recall the loneliness and fear that engulfed me. My life was dark and desolate back then. Had it not been for my strong religious faith, I don’t know how I would have got through that very difficult time.

I look round at the sea of happy faces. All of the people seem to be transfixed by the star of the show as he takes centre stage. With every step and chorus, the applause grows louder.

The people around me occasionally nod and wave in my direction, and it’s a lovely feeling. I don’t know any of them – they are neither neighbours nor friends – yet they are a part of the new ‘family’ that has come into my life over the years. I’ve appeared on television, experienced the applause and warmth of audiences in venues at home and

abroad, mingled with the stars of the entertainment business and been introduced to all kinds of dignitaries, including Prince Charles.

In my 87 years, I've lived two lives that have been so different it's hard to believe they've both been mine.

chapter two

The Lamp in the Window

THE LIGHT IN the window from the tilley lamp was a lovely sight at night. It drew me to the place where I felt so secure and happy.

Our little island home was no mansion, and our family was packed in there like bees in a hive. But there was a lot of love in the house, and, for the most part, there was harmony. Well, as much harmony as you'd expect in a cottage full of young children. You'd rarely hear a raised voice from my mother or father. I think parents were probably a lot more tolerant of noise in those times, particularly as there was no television or radio. Occasionally a row would break out between my brothers as they were playing games and our mother would step in to sort it out, sometimes with the threat of a sally stick across the backs of their legs. And sometimes the threat would be carried out. I don't know what hurt those boys the most, the stinging pain from the beatings or their guilt at forcing Mother to take such drastic action to maintain order. I suspect it was the latter. You'd hate to upset Mother because she was so good to us.

Like all the other island homes, the main living area of the small thatched cottage was a long kitchen that had an open hearth fire. Cooking pots were constantly hanging over the red-hot coals. There was a double bed covered in heavy woollen blankets in the corner, and by night the kitchen would become Mammy and Daddy's bedroom.

It was in this snug little dwelling, sitting on its own small plot of land and surrounded by other similar cottages, that I was born on 15 July 1919. There was no hospital on the island, just a midwife. God help the women if there were any complications during childbirth in those far-off times because the nearest hospital was on the mainland, and getting to it involved a nightmare half-hour trip in a

small, open currach, followed by another journey in a donkey cart. And what woman in the throes of childbirth would be fit to make a sea crossing in a boat like that? So, you had to put your trust in God as you prepared to give birth, and everyone prayed – especially the very agitated father prancing up and down outside the cottage like a demented man about to face a firing squad — that mother and child would survive the act of nature.

By the time I came into the world, my mother had already come through four births and had suffered one tragedy. Her first child, my eldest sister, Bridget, died just a few days after being born on 21 August 1912. That was a terrible, heartbreaking ordeal for my poor mother and father at the start of their married life. It was a wretched period for them. I heard how my mother cried for months during this very bleak time. And of course my father felt totally unable to ease the pain. His own heart was broken too. Their only consolation was their faith. Being good God-loving people, they accepted their cross and, with the support of their kindly neighbours and the passing of time, moved on with their life. I'm sure, though, that losing a child is a trauma you never get over; you just learn to live with it. Bridget, of course, would always remain in their hearts. She was especially remembered on the anniversary of her birth.

Fortunately, Mammy and Daddy went on to be blessed with more children. James (born 1 May 1914), Edward (born 28 January 1916) and Margaret (born 7 October 1917) were already occupying the McGonagle house and creating lots of chatter by the time I came along. No doubt a sigh of relief was heard across the island when the word went round that Margaret McGonagle and her newborn daughter, Julia, were both healthy after the event. By all accounts I was welcomed into the world with a huge outpouring of enthusiasm.

‘She’s the loveliest wee thing the island has ever seen,’ people who came to congratulate Mammy and Daddy are said to have remarked.

My mother, propped up on pillows, was no doubt beaming with delight.

‘Och, she’s a grand wee lass all right.’ That was the comment of all the neighbours who popped their heads through the door to see the island’s newest arrival, according to what I was told many years later. Wasn’t it a pity that I couldn’t appreciate all those flattering remarks at the time! But it’s good to know at any stage that someone spoke so kindly of you.

Later the clan would see the safe arrival of the fifth and final McGonagle baby, a boy called Owen (born 18 March 1921).

Our cottage had two bedrooms. The one in the attic was occupied by my three brothers, while Margaret and I shared the other one.

By the grace of God I was born into a happy home with two of the most wonderful parents any child could wish for. Although it was a hard life for them, there was always food on our plates and laughter in the house. Everyone in our family felt loved by Mammy and Daddy. We were secure in the knowledge that they would be there to guide and protect us during good times and bad. We had a father who worked hard to support us. He was very disciplined in the way he went about his work, and from an early stage in our young lives hard labour was laid out for us too. There was no escaping because it was a constant struggle to survive, and everyone, children as well as adults, had to toil together to get through the year.

My father, James McGonagle, was a fisherman and a great singer. He was born in America to parents who had emigrated from Ireland. His mother, originally from Magilligan in County Derry, and his father, from Owey Island, had met, fallen in love and married in America. They

came home to dear old Donegal after Daddy was born, which was unusual for the times. When people left for America in those bygone days, it was rare for families back home to set eyes on them again for decades, if ever. Whenever anyone emigrated to America, the whole community would go down to the port to see them off, and it was a heartbreaking occasion. In most cases you knew they wouldn't be coming back, so there would be terrible crying. It was like a wake or a funeral.

My grandparents were among the lucky ones who did return. They made their home on Owey Island, where my grandfather became the local postman, taking the letters over and back from the mainland. It was a hard job in those days, as he had to walk more than three miles to the post office after rowing over to the mainland in a currach. There were big parcels coming from America at that time. Relatives from the island who had crossed the Atlantic with the dream of making their fortunes, or at least carving out a better life, would send whatever they could back home to support loved ones on Owey. Postage was cheap, so my grandfather would be laden down with parcels of clothes and all sorts as he returned from an outing to the mainland.

My father grew up on Owey and was steeped in all its traditions. Daddy was a tall, striking man with a big moustache that made him look very distinguished, and hair peppered with silver specks that gradually joined up as the years passed. He always wore an unusual peaked cap that came from Scotland. He would get his shoes made by the shoemaker on the mainland, which might seem extravagant, but you can be sure that the price was right as money was so scarce in those days.

You could tell by the way the islanders behaved around him that my father was a much-loved and well-respected member of the community. He was strong of character but very unassuming with it. Although he was a quiet man in many respects, whenever there was a hooley on the island

and he was requested to sing, Daddy duly obliged to wild applause. There was no Daniel O'Donnell in those times, so Daddy was the next best thing.

Providing for a big family, even though five children was only half the size of some of the island's clans, must have been very daunting for Daddy. It was a huge responsibility, and it must have been frightening at times as the food ran out. It certainly didn't allow for any slacking off in the daily grind. Indeed, the same could be said about every other husband and father on the island. They were all hard-working men. They'd get up in the middle of the night to go fishing, and during the day they also had to attend to the bits and pieces of farming that contributed to the upkeep of their families.

My father fished lobsters during the summer months when the weather was calm. But even in the summertime he took no chances and always carried a little bottle of holy water in the currach. Everyone during those times believed in the power of prayer to keep them safe and healthy. Daddy used to cure herrings as bait for the lobsters. He often told the story of how one day as he was slicing up the herring bait and preparing the lobster pots he left a piece of herring with a knife stuck in it lying on the ground. Suddenly a seagull swooped down and took the herring with the knife away in its beak. My father had to return to the house to get another knife, and it wasn't the Lord's Prayer he said for the seagull!

As soon as the children were fit to work, it was all hands on deck to keep the family provided with food and heat. Back then everyone shared the responsibility, so Daddy had his little army of workers. From the moment we learned how to walk, we were given small jobs. There was no such thing as children being pampered in those far-off times. The work would get harder as you got older, but you were trained to do life's chores from such a young age that it

was never a shock to the system, despite being almost unbearable at times.

Mammy originally came from the mainland, and she went on to the island when she married my father. My earliest memory of my mother is of her sitting in the corner frantically sewing for us children and her darling husband. She was the only dressmaker on the island at the time and the only person with a foot-action sewing machine, so her services were always in demand from neighbours. She did a lot of sewing for people on Owey, in particular for our cousins the McDevitt family, who were very close to us. There were six children in that family – Dominic, Edward, Charlie, Willie, Bridget and Mary. We were like one family as they were always in and out of our house, and we got on well together. They joined us in our games, and Willie and myself became very close as children. It was a friendship and a bond that we would maintain throughout our lives. Mammy made all the clothes for the McDevitts as their own mother couldn't turn her hand to that kind of work.

Our mother was a very quiet person who loved her home and her family. She wasn't the sort of woman who would go away visiting the neighbours to catch up on the latest gossip, she would always find something to be doing at home, where she was happiest. She was a great housekeeper.

There was a fair day over on the mainland in Dungloe on the fourth of every month, and she and my father would make the half-hour crossing over to it in a currach. They would spend several hours sifting through the street stalls for bargains, and rarely would they come away empty-handed. They weren't after luxuries or personal treats. They'd pick up cheap overcoats which my mother would rip apart when she got home, washing them and making our clothes with the material – suits for the boys and skirts for me and Maggie. Mammy never bought anything in that market other than an item of clothing she could make into

some kind of an outfit for her children. She was a genius at sewing, really gifted with her hands. When we got flour for baking our bread, it came in large 8-stone bags. When the bags were empty, she would wash and then dye them and make lovely dresses for us. Four bags would make sheets for the beds, so she never had to buy any material. She'd knit big socks for us that we'd wear if the weather was extremely cold in the winter. And we'd go barefoot during the summer and autumn. We'd wear those socks till April, when the temperature would start to rise again.

'What do you think of that?' my mother would ask, displaying one of the garments she had designed and made from clothing she'd picked up in the market.

'That's grand. Just grand,' we'd say.

Mammy would smile, satisfied with the fruits of her work. Then she'd store away the garment until it was needed. Nothing was ever worn without a good reason. Everything was saved until it was absolutely essential to use it.

In the summertime my father went over to Kincasslagh every Saturday to sell his lobsters, and then he'd buy the week's groceries from the shop. My mother always ordered 2 pounds of mince for our Sunday dinner. After eating fish every day during the week, it was a great treat. One day my father bought the mince and then slipped into Logue's pub for a beer as a little treat for himself. He left his bag of shopping outside because in those times you never had to worry about it being stolen, certainly not in that part of the world anyway.

However, when he came out, Daddy was horrified to see the tail end of a dog sticking out of the bag of groceries. The dog's tail wagging wasn't a good sign. Sure enough, after Daddy gave the dog a kick up the backside and sent him racing off down the street, he discovered that all the mince had been eaten by the mutt. What was he going to do? He didn't have enough money to buy more mince. And

he couldn’t face going home to tell everyone what had happened. He obviously felt really stupid that he had left the meat lying around to tempt any animal. He could hardly blame the dog; he didn’t know any better. So on his return home he told a little white lie to my mother, claiming that the shop had run out of mince. As he looked round the kitchen Daddy could see a row of little faces all looking so disappointed. He must have felt as small as a Jack Russell at that moment. We had fish again that Sunday, and it was only with the passing of time that Daddy told the true story of the scavenging dog that took advantage of a man’s thirst for a pint.

As children we enjoyed a lot of freedom on Owey. Island life was carefree in the sense that parents never had to worry about their children coming to any harm from another human being. Nowadays people don’t know their neighbours a few doors away from them. There was no stranger on the island in our time. Neither were there any secrets among the houses; everyone knew what the other one was up to. You could walk through the door of any house uninvited. There was no such thing as knockers on doors; you just walked in, and you were welcome. And you could trust every man, woman and child. There were no bad fellows on the island. Everyone looked out for each other and supported each other. If someone took ill during the night and needed a doctor, all the houses would light up their lamps, and the people would spill out into the darkness to help. There were four men on standby every night in case of an emergency. They were designated as the men who would row the boat to the mainland. Everyone else would help out with the preparations and lead the way to the boat by the light from their lanterns.

Owey had 30 houses, and we were related to a number of the families: the McGonagles, the Gallaghers and, as I mentioned, the McDevitts. Even though the houses were small, many of them accommodated huge numbers of

offspring. There were a dozen in some cottages between parents and children. You'd wonder how such small cottages could accommodate so many. It was like a magic illusion as a never-ending stream of people would file out of one family home. It's amazing how people can adjust to their surroundings when they have to.

You'd wonder how the mothers and fathers didn't go mad with so many children in the house, but in those times, long before television and video and DVD were heard of, us children were very inventive in finding ways to amuse ourselves. We'd herd the cows home from the fields around 11 a.m. during the summer. After they were milked, the animals were tied in until 3 p.m., and then we'd go back out to the fields with them and play our games there.

In the summertime the sun would be glistening on the surface of the clear blue sea as we carefully made our way along the well-worn island path with the cows. Sometimes I'd let out a yelp after stepping on a sharp pebble. On days like that, the water sparkled like a huge diamond ring: the rays shooting on to the sea looked like they were sending messages from heaven.

Owey Island during the summer is the most beautiful and magical place in the world. It was so eerily quiet, you could nearly hear the grass growing between the stones. Skipping along the pathways as a child, I took the scenic beauty and the unusual inlets that nature had carved out for granted.

There is one particular rock formation that as children we were led to believe was a giant's chair. You had to crawl carefully across rocks to reach it. I only did that the one time because getting off it is a very dangerous manoeuvre, and I got a fright when I nearly slipped. I was terrified because I could so easily have fallen to my death on the rocks below. The giant's grave is said to be at a nearby spot. Stones marked the head and the feet, and no grass ever grows in between, so folklore has it.

Before heading off with the cows, we'd steal an egg or two from underneath our hens and take them with us to the mountain. Just one egg provided many hours of fun. We'd place it a few yards in front of us, and then one of us would be blindfolded. Using a stick, that player had to attempt to hit the egg. Each of us took a turn, and whoever broke the egg with the stick was deemed to be the winner. An egg might last for five days before somebody would strike it.

Another popular form of amusement involved wee rabbits which could be found hopping around in the vicinity of the mountain. Because they were small, the young rabbits were easy to catch by hand. You'd make a run at them and grab them in a diving tackle. Then we used them to play a game. A square was formed with sticks on the ground, and then we'd wet the wee rabbits in a nearby lake. When they were wet, they weren't able to run for some odd reason. A rabbit was then placed in the centre of the square, with a player at each corner. As the rabbit began to dry off, he'd start to get a new lease of life, and whichever side he raced to, the player on that side had to try to catch him. The person who was first to catch the rabbit was declared the winner. Now people might think that was cruel to the wee rabbits, but there was no harm in it at all. We'd always let them hop away afterwards, and I doubt they suffered any trauma as we took great care to handle them gently.

We played marbles a lot too. Three holes would be poked in the ground, and then you'd try to flick the marbles into them. Those were all simple pastimes, but we enjoyed them as we knew nothing better.

Santa Claus, of course, would visit the island every Christmas, but he didn't have a big sack back then. The presents were very modest, especially by today's standards. I remember one Christmas Santa left me an apple and a bar of chocolate. Another time Maggie and myself got wee sets of cups and saucers. An aunt in America sent us dolls

once. They were the prettiest things with lovely hair, nice shoes and gorgeous clothes. But we weren't allowed to spoil them. After a day or two they were hung up in the kitchen for show. Everyone who came into the house admired those two dolls. Maggie and myself would sit and gaze at them too but with a feeling of fierce frustration. All we wanted to do was hug those dolls, comb their hair, and undress and dress them up again. We just wanted to play with them. But like our good clothes and good shoes, we were never allowed to spoil them.

It wasn't all fun and games, of course. As I mentioned, we all had our jobs to do as well. Everyone on the island had a small farm. It was nothing to brag about, just enough to provide a family with vegetables, including potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbage and other produce. We were very self-sufficient on the island for the most part. It was only small luxuries that were occasionally brought over from the mainland.

Although there are many great memories, especially as the passing of time seems to play tricks with the mind and you only seem to recall the good things that happened, I don't have a romantic notion about all of my life on the island. It was very hard most of the time, even when we were young children. I still remember the excruciatingly painful blisters on my hands from kibbin' potatoes. The ground was like concrete, and you'd be down on your hands and knees with a kibbin' iron, which was like a trowel, scooping out the soil to sow the potato seeds. I was only about ten or eleven years old at the time, but when I'd look at my hands they were like old people's because they were covered in blisters and welts. Sometimes I'd feel so miserable working outdoors in the cold and the wet, or in the scorching sun, that I'd be praying for the day to end. But you'd never complain to anyone. This was normal life. I'd look around at all the other kids, and they were doing