

JOYCE GRENFELL on MARY O'HARA
From Joyce's autobiography, *In Pleasant Places*,
Macmillan, London 1979, pp. 72-75

Mary O'Hara, the Irish singer who accompanies herself on a small harp, first came into my life in the mid-1950s when John Gielgud asked me if I would advise a young and very talented Dublin girl, not yet known in Britain, about getting an agent to look after her concert and recording work. He thought she should try and work for intimate audiences, as I was doing in revue. Reggie and I were then living in the old walk-up flat in the King's Road. Mary came to tea with me and sat long at the kitchen table, while she told me about her happy life married to an American poet, Richard Selig, and the concerts she soon hoped to be giving in England. I was beguiled by her unspoilt beauty and the lilt in her voice; she was the epitome of a fictional Irish colleen – exquisite complexion, starry eyes and all the rest. She had no experience of agents, and the approaches being made to her didn't seem to offer the kind of jobs in the kind of places she felt were right for her programmes.

I've no idea what I advised, but we made friends, and she sent me a copy of one of her first recordings, sung in a clear early morning soprano, very musical and very appealing.

Her marriage to Richard was tragically brief. He died within fifteen months of the wedding. I lost touch with her for a while, but when she arrived in Sydney, to do charity concerts for some Roman Catholic 'good cause', she came to stay with me in my flat. It was a difficult time for her. She was still numbed by sorrow. The reverend fathers who were running her tour were inept at the task; she was at the same time unpublicised and exploited by them. Bill and I went to one of her Sunday concerts and were distressed by the evident lack of presentation and apparent failure to recognise her unique talent. But in spite of this she knocked us sideways – and for the audience of the uncomprehending faithful, and a few knowledgeable concert-goers who had discovered she was in Sydney, the quality of her performance was unmistakable.

Mary was an easy guest; quiet and orderly – the kind that leaves her room and the bathroom tidier than she found it. She was only with me for four days. Breakfast was our

meeting time. We had plenty to talk about. I see her now sitting opposite me on a sunny morning, wearing a white polo-necked sweater and holding in her hand a scarlet apple. She was twenty-four years old and a radiant beauty. She said she had something important to tell me. Her life was over. Her marriage had been perfect. The world no longer had any flavour for her. She believed she had a calling and to follow it was the only way she would find peace. She had decided to enter a religious order. Such decisions are personal and private, and I forbore to say what every instinct in me was saying loudly, *Don't*. I did urge her to take time to consider every aspect before she took such an enormous step. She said she had already done so. Her mind was made up.

I heard from her occasionally, and then a letter came to say she was taking her first vows – in a Silent Order. I shrank from the picture of Mary silenced. Surely, I imagined, she would at least be allowed to sing in chapel? She gave me her new religious name, and said she might not be able to write to me again. But eventually she wrote to tell me she would be taking her final vows on the day of my birthday. After that there were no more letters but she sent me a birthday card each February. Then a letter came to tell me a friend was bringing me a recording of religious music she had made for the Abbey in which



Mary O'Hara, New Zealand tour 1959

she was a nun; and asking for some information I was able to send her. The friend delivered the record and reported that Mary was well and seemed serene.

I do not know the details about her decision after twelve years to leave the order and return to the world. I do know it was not lightly taken and had occupied her for a very long time. When she left, it was with the understanding of her wise Abbess. It was a right decision for Mary. She came to see me a few weeks after she came out, still bewildered by the world, traffic, noise and crowds. She was too thin and looked as if she had been through a good deal of anguish. But she had begun to feel well again and was picking up the threads of her singing career. She already had engagements booked.

Mary is as tall as I am but three sizes smaller. I had retired from doing my own concerts, but up in the wardrobe I still had some of my stage dresses. They were waisted, with long sleeves, and by pulling in the belts they could be made to fit her. The bright clear colours suited her temporary pallor. It was good to know the dresses, still with plenty of life in them, would again be seen under the lights.

Now Mary is an international star, gives sell-out concerts at the Albert Hall in London and Carnegie Hall in New York; she is often on television and radio, plays at the Palladium and has become a house-hold word all over the world. When Mary was the subject of *This is Your Life* – a television programme of which I do not wholly approve because of its invasion of privacy, but which I cannot resist watching – I was invited to join her family and friends to reminisce about her. It was a successful half-hour of warmth, some laughter and a good deal of emotion. Mary is one of those rare women who look as lovely when they weep as when they smile, and when they do both at the same time, as Mary did that evening, the effect is devastating. Her story reads like a novel. And it is all true. Some day she is going to write it, and it will be well told; for she is not only a talented performer who arranges her scholarly-researched folk songs and sings all sorts of other music- and looks lovely as she does it – but she is also literate.

Sources for the following: J Hampton (ed) Joyce and Ginnie, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996; Joyce Grenfell, A Biography by J Hampton, Hodder 2002

While Joyce was in Sydney in 1959 she met the beautiful Irish singer and harpist Mary O'Hara. In the mid 1950s when Mary's work was becoming known outside Ireland, and different London based promoters were vying to handle her career, she needed guidance in the matter. Her fiancé had met Sir John Gielgud and asked his advice. Gielgud suggested she contact Joyce. Mary was about to make a TV appearance on Children's Hour, so Joyce said she'd watch the programme, after which they could talk together over tea at Joyce's flat in the King's Road. She immediately took to her: a warm friendship grew between them. 'Joyce was gracious, kind and strongly encouraging', remembered Mary. 'She was helpful in many ways, even about giving me tips as to what outfits looked better on television and what to avoid.' Joyce also advised Mary which agent to choose. Later that year, 1956, when she heard from Mary that she and her husband were going to live in New York, Joyce offered to write to Ed Sullivan recommending her for his television show. After an audition he asked her to appear on his St. Patrick's Day programme [Sunday march 17 1957]. It was not a success - Mary had to sit in the background in front of a giant cardboard shamrock while across the stage an Irish wolfhound sat in front of another. Mary was so incensed that she sat with her back to the camera. Although billed as a main feature, half way through the live show she was told there wouldn't be time for her to sing at all. Then, just before the credits, Sullivan pushed her in front of the camera and told her to start singing. The programme ended as she sang the first verse of 'Danny Boy'.

Now, two years later, aged 24, Mary had been persuaded to do an eight week tour of Australia to raise money for hospitals etc., run by the St Vincent de Paul, a Catholic charity. Joyce took Bill and some friends to Mary's opening concert in Sydney. 'She is a genius. It is the loveliest performance you ever heard and saw. Pretty as paint, young and very talented. She sings to a little Irish harp. 'We all loved it,' wrote Joyce to Virginia. One weekend while Mary was half way through her tour, Joyce invited her to stay in the tiny spare room in her roof top flat (Maclay Regis) overlooking Sydney harbour. Joyce was normally very

protective of her private space - even Bill was only invited up to supper and Scrabble on Sunday evenings - but Joyce sensed that Mary would be a quiet and easy guest. 'No complaints except that I really like it best when I'm here on my own. Selfish to the core, that's me,' said Joyce. Joyce treated Mary with kindness and patience, and made no comment when Mary lost her key and woke Joyce at 3 a.m. Mary was one of the few people to see Joyce's hair as she wore it in bed - in a long plait down her back. Joyce was horrified by the amateurish publicity arrangements for the tour - Mary was arriving in small towns unheralded and playing sometimes to virtually empty halls.

Joyce gently but firmly told the organisers what should be done to improve the situation. July 29 1959 The next day Mary went to tea and sang unaccompanied: 'Mary O'Hara came to tea. She's very refreshing, a touching creature. Rabid RC but I must say it gives her great joy and support. When Mary sang 'She Moved Through the Fair' unaccompanied to Bill and Joyce 'it was so remarkable and touching that we were both quite cold with wonder. She is an artist.'

Joyce enjoyed preparing 'good plain cooking' for Mary and even said to her "I've worked it out - you could have been our daughter"- surely wishful thinking? Mary was staying with Joyce on the third anniversary of her marriage to the American poet Richard Selig, who died of Hodgkin's Disease - cancer of the lymph glands - just 15 months after their wedding (23 July 1956). 'She is absolutely undaunted. "God looks after me" she says. And why not.' Although Joyce was somewhat prejudiced against Roman Catholics, she liked Mary and admired her practice of her Faith. Joyce was amused that when they both set off their different churches, Mary took her tennis racquet with her, hoping for a game with the priest. 'She's a nice creature - practically a nun really.' This presumably because Mary had confided to Joyce what she had told only her closest friends - that she planned to go into a monastery. Joyce was horrified, and without telling her not to, urged her to think very carefully before taking such a bold step. Mary's mind was already made up and almost three years later she entered a contemplative community of the Benedictine Order in England. Her Solemn Profession day coincided with Joyce's birthday, and every year after that she sent Joyce a birthday card.

Thirteen years later Mary left the Order. Some months before, in that summer of 1974 Mary had recorded a new album - 'Mary O'Hara: Recital' - and Joyce had written the sleeve notes for it.

Shortly after she had come out of the monastery, Mary went to see Joyce in Elm Park Gardens. Joyce rejoiced at Mary's return to music and gave her two of her silk stage dresses designed by Clive. Joyce had visions of her dresses appearing on stage again. 'We were the same height and I had them taken in, but sadly they were not really what a young singer could wear in 1975,' Mary admitted twenty years later. For the rest of Joyce's life she encouraged Mary. Joyce even agreed to appear for Mary O'Hara on *This Is Your Life*, one of her least favourite television programmes. Mary had the same feelings towards this invasion of privacy, but maintained a brave smile as long lost friends and relations appeared out of the blue.

In 1985 Mary married Pdraig O'Toole an Irishman and a teacher and journalist. She retired from performing music at the top of her skill and career in 1994 and although their home is still in England, at the moment (2002) they are living and working in Tanzania.

During her Sydney tour, Mary and Joyce had one day talked about nervousness on stage. Mary herself was a particularly tense performer and any distraction added to that tension. At a recent performance her concentration had been sorely tested by two little girls at the left end of the front row who spent a lot of the time crinkling shiny paper. It took enormous will power not to glare at them between songs. She managed to get through the concert without even giving them a look. When it was over, fans gathered round the stage door. The two little girls appeared, and presented her with orchids, wrapped in shiny cellophane. She was so relieved that she had ignored what had been happening. She realised they must have spent their precious pocket money on those special orchids just for her. 'You must never give in to that temptation,' agreed Joyce. 'If the audience annoy you, just must keep on loving them, laying special stress on that last bit. She then told Mary about a performance she had witnessed by Ruth Draper.

The theatre was full and enjoying her monologues, and there was one man in the

circle who laughed longer and louder than anyone else. When the rest of the audience tittered, he guffawed. When they stopped laughing, he carried on. Half way through a monologue, when he had laughed again at an inappropriate moment, Ruth Draper stopped and looking straight at him said, 'It wasn't that funny.' He shut up after that, but so did the rest of the audience. They were all intimidated, and she had lost them. After seeing what happened to Ruth Draper, Joyce vowed never to let an audience get to her.

'Whatever your audience is like, you just have to love them,' Joyce told Mary. However, it was in Sydney in 1959 when the audience did get to Joyce – but she handled it so skilfully that they loved her more for it and not less. Clive James, then a student, recalled the incident. 'It was the custom for everyone in the audience to buy a five-shilling box of Winning Post chocolates during the interval and consume the entire contents during the second half. Each chocolate was wrapped individually in crinkly brown paper and there was a printed guide, also on crinkly paper, to help you identify the flavour of each chocolate by its shape. The printed guide made, if anything, even more noise than the wrappings. When the lights went down for the second half the whole audience pulled the lids off their boxes of chocolates - the lids came off with an audible sob, betokening the tightness of the air seal - and started searching through the crinkly wrappers or the chocolate of their choice. It sounded like a million locusts camping on your television aerial. Joyce put up with it for two nights and then decided it was time to call a halt. On the third night the lights went down, the curtain went up, and they were at it. Instead of launching into the second half opening song, Joyce advanced regally to the footlights and told the audience that if the eating of the chocolates could be delayed until the end of the performance it might be possible to enjoy both her and them, but if the chocolates had to be eaten now then she would be obliged to withdraw. The audience sat stunned, freshly unwrapped heart-shaped strawberry cream halfway between lap and gaping mouth. There was a long, tense, silence. Then from here, there and eventually everywhere came the reluctant sigh of life being squeezed back on. 'The press next day tried to make a thing out of Joyce's queenly intransigence, but the public loved her for it.'

Joyce had tackled the chocolate wrapper problem with care - she suppressed her

annoyance and did not interrupt her own show. She did not accuse any single member of the audience, and nor did she demand obedience: she gave the audience a choice, expressing no particular interest in which choice they made.

Joyce Grenfell's sleeve notes for Mary O'Hara's album 'Recital'.

Mary O'Hara brings the rare qualities of beauty of sound and heart and musicianship to her singing. She allows the songs to speak for themselves and I get the feeling that she sings them as they were originally intended to be heard – the direct Communication between the composer and poet's idea and the listener's ear. The effect is immediate and timeless. An American critic once wrote about Myra Hess: "You do not go to a Myra Hess concert to hear Myra Hess. You go to hear music." The same can be said about Mary O'Hara's recordings. She sings to the Glory of God.

Joyce Grenfell