

The Mayo News

A journey from Arabia to Achill – Neill O’Neill

NEWPORT-BASED author Noel Scanlon is not a man who writes about anything that pops into his head. Rather, his gripping fiction incorporates a startling amount of reality, with its basis in fact coming from his own experiences of the time and places he writes about.

His latest offering - 'The Gulf' - is about an Irish couple who get caught up in the chaos of a revolution while working in the Gulf state of Khor Fahal, which is an amalgam of a number of Gulf states known well to Mr Scanlon.

In a time when the economic outlook in Ireland was bleak, Noel Scanlon left the country. Avoiding the mailboat to England and the droves heading for America, he secured a job in frontier banking and settled in the Middle East.

Returning to Ireland with a lifetime of experiences 20 years later, Noel and his wife Joan came west and bought a cottage in Derreens in Achill. After a few years they bought The Amethyst guesthouse and after renovating it began operated a thriving summer business - hosting the likes of Edna O'Brien and Daniel Day Lewis - while during the winter they wrote and painted.

Now living in Sara Percival's house on the quay in Newport, Noel finds he has more time to dedicate to his writing. The author of 'Quinn', 'Quinn and the Desert Oil', 'Apparitions' and 'Black Ashes' - all of which also incorporate experiences from his years spent living abroad Noel says he has no idea how or why he became a writer, but that his unusual experiences from periods spent living in Ireland, Arabia and India have been instrumental in shaping his person and his work 'The Gulf' is fully in keeping with this.

Written in Mayo over a 12-month period, the story is told through two characters, David and Deborah, both of whom are Irish David - like Noel- is a banker and is familiar with the Arab world, while it is all new to Deborah. Without spoiling the plot to much, a revolution breaks out and David is kidnapped leaving Deborah to fend for herself, cut off from other ex-pats in a situation where it is dangerous for a European woman to even venture out alone,.

What is so believable and gripping about this story is that it is fiction based on facts and encapsulates some of the Scanlons' own experiences in the Gulf area over many decades.

The revolution in the book is based on their own experiences in various trouble spots, from the terrorism in Aden to the national uprising in Hadhramut - where many of their friends were shot. Various parts of the book are based on real people and places, The suq descriptions are a mixture of the many marketplaces familiar to the Scanlons, while the long desert drive is based on long drives Noel used to regularly make through the Arabian desert to open banks in remote towns.

The Gulf that existed when Noel Scanlon first arrived in the fifties is radically different from the one we know today.

"For thousands of years that part of Arabia was remote, sand-blown and unknown," he says, "The coast was known as the Pirate Coast and the hinterland was a great unknown

and untraveled desert which only the Bedu, a tough hardy race, crossed with their camels.

The first explorers like Doughty, Philby and Lawrence built up a romantic concept of Arabia in the European mind, but what changed everything in Arabia was the discovery of oil which had lain for so many centuries beneath the camels' feet.'

In the book, Noel predicts what he feels is likely to happen in the Gulf - that these now superwealthy, oil-rich states, with practices that have strayed far from the strict Islamic code, are being watched closely by radical Islamists within the Arab world - with revolutions and risings an inevitable consequence.