

Connaught Telegraph

Mayo based Author predicts a Middle East uprising

Chiller Thriller

NOEL Scanlon has got ME. Not the disease I hasten to add, rather Middle East syndrome. Although gone from the Gulf for more than 20 years you can tell he still pines a little for these mysterious lands of sheiks and suqs, camels and oil rigs.

When we meet in the sitting room of the house he shares with his wife, Joan, overlooking The Quay in Newport, the author has a map of the Gulf in front of him with places such as Kuwait, Muscat, Riyadh and the great desert of Rub al Khali highlighted in green dayglo.

There is a touch of the old colonial, even hints of the military colonel, about Scanlon Not alone in the manner in which he speaks but also the way he jabs a finger at these locations like a General about to order a tank attack on a hot and dusty distant fortress.

"For thousands of years that part of Arabia was remote, sand blown and unknown," he explained. "The hinterland was a great, unknown and untraveled desert which only the Bedu, a tough hardy race, crossed with their camels in an unchanging manner for thousands of years."

Scanlon has put his wealth of knowledge and understanding of Saudi and surrounding places to great use in his latest novel *The Gulf* which has just been published.

In the words of the author, *The Gulf* is a thriller though it also has an element of adventure. Mostly it's set in an Arab town with lots of expatriates.

The book predicts what is likely to happen in the Gulf in the near future. It is not a cheery forecast.

Explains the author: "These now super rich wealthy oil rich slates with practices which have strayed far from the strict Islamic code, are being watched closely by radical Islamists within the Arab world.

"I have no doubt that risings or revolutions of the sort I describe will take place, probably in the near future."

Scanlon, a native of Athy, Co. Kildare, spent some 20 years in the Middle East before moving to Achill Island with Joan to run *The Amethyst*, a hotel and restaurant in Achill.

Their guests at *The Amethyst* over the years included the writer Edna O'Brien; filmmaker Pat O'Connor; actor Daniel Day Lewis; and the journalist/author John Healy.

Recently the couple and their dogs, Chance, a collie, and Lady, a springer spaniel, along with Bianca the cat, moved from *The Amethyst* to rented accommodation, the designer Sara Percival's former home, in Newport.

The move from the busy hotel surroundings to their beautifully furnished new home affords Scanlon greater freedom to write all year round. It also allows Joan greater time to make use of her gifts as an artist.

He was first published in *The Bell*, the Dublin literary magazine of the 1950s, while working with the Royal Bank in Dublin at the time.

"It was a very poor time in Ireland," he recalls. "People were jumping on the mailboat to Britain to get away from the poverty."

International opportunity knocked for Scanlon when he saw an advertisement seeking banking staff for positions in India.

When he went to London for an interview, probably one of the most significant questions he was asked was: "Do you play cricket?"

Scanlon replied in the affirmative. The job was his. Next thing he knew he was off on a ship to Bombay at the start of an international career in banking.

"Writing is a disease, a bug," Scanlon tells me looking across a polished table purchased decades ago in some foreign outpost.

"A good disease to have," I suggested.

"I don't know," he chuckled. "You can suffer for it too." When Scanlon was a younger man in Dublin, the well known writers of the time were invariably male - people like Patrick Kavanagh, J.P. Donleavy and Anthony Cronin.

Now most of the top selling writers in Ireland are women. Not that he is dismissive or complaining. "I am not denigrating anyone. I have respect for any body that writes a book."

The reason for the female writing boom, he says, is that the needs of the marketplace are being satisfied. Girls nowadays read more than boys.

"Most people in publishing are women. Writers, agents, publicists, the lot. "It would not be possible nowadays to market a male book. That is the way the world goes."

"After all," he adds, by way of afterthought, there was a time when women couldn't publish a book. One of the Bronte women had to go along and pretend to be a man to publish a book."

There's no doubt Scanlon, who has a string of books to his credit, is quirky, slightly eccentric. Good qualities definitely in a writer.

The message on his answering machine, in which he pretends to be a 19th century occupant of his two-storey house, now long dead, testifies to that.

Most people laugh when they hear the spoof message. Others take it seriously. One person rang the gardai when she heard the message as she thought the new occupants were being held against their will in the building.

Scanlon chuckles at the memory before reaching for a leash to take Chance for a stroll along Newport Quay.

Compared to the heat and dust of the Middle East, the fresh sea air is invigorating.