



Monday in **Life&Culture:**
How the iPhone made me love
photography again. By Bryan O'Brien

All I knew about Afghanistan was years of war



GENERATION EMIGRATION

This time last year, Noel Scanlon couldn't afford to bring his sons to see Santa. Since taking a job in Afghanistan, his mortgage is up to date and his family can afford a holiday for the first time since 2008

I SET UP a small architectural-services company from my home in 2003, and within a few years I had five staff and a small office in Limerick. I really enjoyed running my own business, but in August 2008 we hit problems. Lehman Brothers went to the wall shortly after that, and as anyone involved in construction knows well, that was when things went seriously pear-shaped.

In the space of just one month, our turnover was down by 70 per cent. It was a scary time. By Christmas we had closed the office and moved the business back to the house.

My wife Laura, who had been working for the company, went back into hotel management and I took a part-time job with another firm. We entered 2011 with a few months' arrears on our mortgage, and last Christmas we really struggled to put things together for our two boys, Daithí (who is nine) and Oisín (six).

I got a phone call in May from a friend and former client asking if I knew someone who would be interested in taking a project-management position with a construction firm in Afghanistan. I called around to a few people I knew, and one of them said to me: "Noel, would you not do it yourself?" I hadn't even thought of it before. I discussed it with my wife, and within a week we had decided it was the right thing to do.

I wasn't concerned about the work itself, but the safety element and the long periods of separation from my family were a worry. The work was to be exclusively within a military base, and I was assured it would be safe. So I went for it and arrived here at the Tarin Kowt base in Uruzgan province in July. There are 4,500 people stationed at the base, which is jointly managed by the US and Australian armies.

All I knew about Afghanistan before I took the job was what I had heard in news reports about the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, years of war and suicide bombers. I didn't have any illusions: I knew it was a very dangerous country. But I also knew that the area I was going into was protected. Every time I have to move away from the base, it is always by military helicopter.

Copenhagen Contractors, the Danish company I work for, was founded by a former military man.

It provides services for areas hit by war or natural disasters. Ninety per cent of my work is for the Australian military, building and managing accommodation and services for the soldiers.

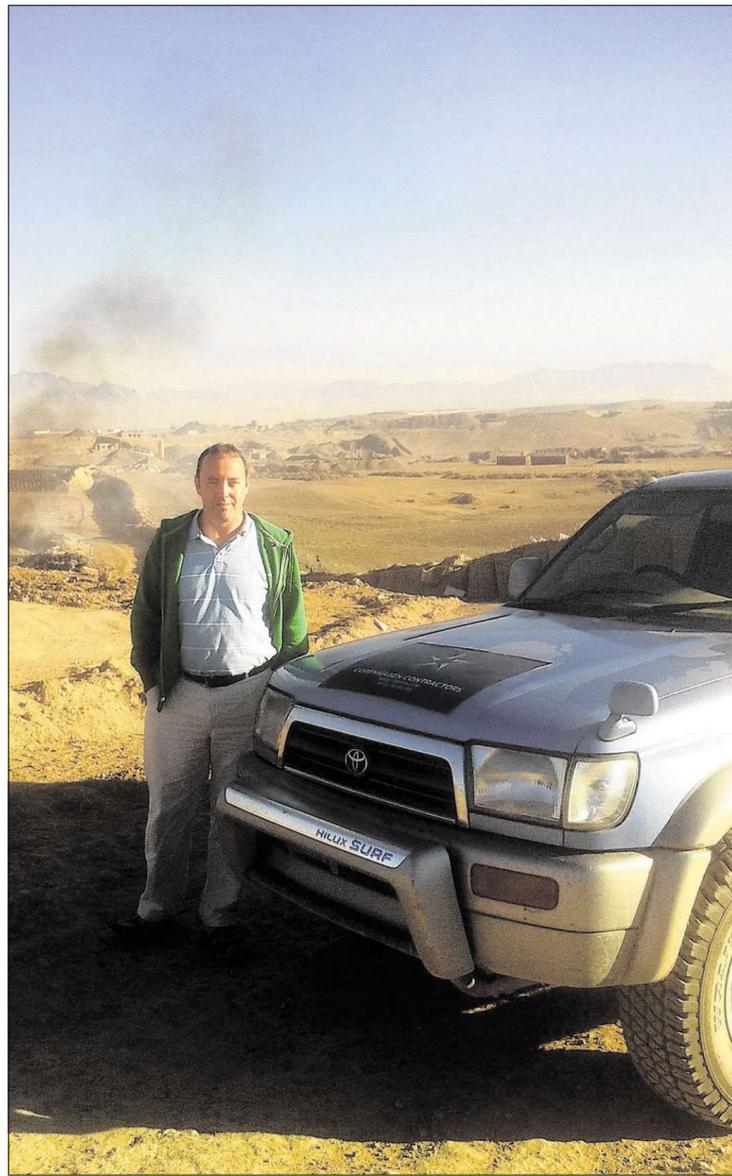
The environment within the base is very work-focused. I get up before 6am, start work at 7am, and usually don't finish until after 8pm, six days a week. We work long hours, but I've never been averse to hard work. To be honest, it comes naturally when you're here, because there's not a lot else to do when you have spare time.

We have one coffee shop and a gym, which I try to use on my days off. We are living in an enclosed compound, so doing some exercise helps to dispel the sense of claustrophobia. I've also started a blog about my experiences here and about the books I'm reading.

I was home for two weeks in October, which was great, but leaving again after the fortnight was very difficult. I felt like a visitor in my own home, living out of a suitcase and then packing up again to go back. It was a weird experience. But I'll be home for another two weeks at Christmas, which I'm really looking forward to.

The Ailwee Cave, near Ballyvaughan in west Co Clare, has a fantastic Santa's workshop every Christmas, which we have gone to every year since our first boy was about two years old. It is a great day for the kids, but there is a cost to it, and last year we just couldn't afford it. This year we have had it booked since September and I'm coming home a few days early so we can all go together. To me, things like that make the time away worthwhile.

We have noticed a huge change in our finances over the past few months. Last June I couldn't



afford to wind up my own company. Since I've been over here we've been able to do that, and our mortgage is back up to date. One of my sons is now doing guitar lessons and, heading into the new year, we'll be able to plan a holiday for the family, something we haven't done since 2008.

If someone had told me last Christmas I would be living in Afghanistan in a year's time, I would never have believed them. I'll stay for a year, and hopefully by then I will have found something back home, or perhaps in another Gulf country that is a little safer than here, or in Britain, where I would be closer to my family. I am willing to do whatever it takes now.

This experience has been about

'This experience has been about more than just work for me; it has given me a different perspective on life and what is important to me.'
Noel Scanlon in Afghanistan

more than just work for me; it has given me a different perspective on life and what is important to me. Coming over here, the anger and frustration I used to feel about the state of the country has waned somewhat, because you realise we have the ability to change things in Ireland. The problems are big, but they are absolutely nothing compared with the problems people face in Afghanistan in their day-to-day lives.

We have an educated population, we are able to go abroad and we are able to make things happen for ourselves. Maybe things aren't as bad as we sometimes make them out to be.

In conversation with Ciara Kenny

MICHAEL HARDING



I listen to budgets but I don't belong to that world any more

I feel helpless and lonely, lying in bed at 8am, wondering should I turn off the radio

BIG EVENTS DON'T frighten me. The imminent collapse of the euro or the implementation of the budget leaves me unmoved. But it is in tiny things that I fail, and in tiny failures that I am terrified. It is not on the ocean but in small places that I perish.

In fact, I don't even feel I am included in big events. I listen to budgets and announcements about economic cuts as if I didn't quite belong to that world any more. I feel alienated, anonymous, helpless, and lonely, lying in bed at 8am, in the dark, wondering should I turn off the radio and get up. Which is why I get up - because I have to try.

A greetings card lying in the hall on Tuesday, from someone in Clare, contained a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Happiness is at your fingertips. All you have to do is reach out and touch it." But there was no name on the card, which infuriated me.

I decided to vacuum-clean the front room. At least that would be an achievement. I plugged in the machine and unravelled the flex and rubbed the carpet a few times, and noticed that there was dust on the sofa from an incense stick I had burned the previous night. I dismantled the long arm of the Hoover and poked the short nozzle into the crevices and around the armrests, but before I could stop it the machine sucked up a €10 note that was wedged behind a cushion; my change from a naggin of brandy. I saw the money fly up the spout, but I couldn't stop it. I had to open the machine, and of course the bag inside was impossible to penetrate with my fingers, so I ripped it apart in a rage, and poked the dust and found the money.

I spend a lot of time alone, in a house that has become my study and refuge. There's no one there but me, and after the episode with the Hoover I was full of unfocused frustration, so I drove into town.

I went to a bakery and chose a cherry cake and said: "That's a miserable day." In fact it was mild and dry.

"Well," the woman behind the counter said, "it's not that bad."

"But," I said, "yesterday was rough." She said: "It's not freezing and it's not pouring rain." "True," I agreed, "but it is very dark."

She said: "It's December!" And although a Cavan lake can be a foggy world in early December, I went for a walk that afternoon in Killykeen Forest Park, and to my great relief the lake was grey and full of light. The lower half of the sky was a pale water colour, and the woods around me were comforting.

Suddenly the sky darkened and hailstones surprised me. I stood under a tree until they ended, as abruptly as they had begun, and standing before me was a squirrel, a red squirrel, beautiful in shape, colour and fur, and independence of mind. He cast his imperious eye on me for a moment, and then raced up a tree to some unknown world.

There are unknown worlds all around in the forest, and it's easy to believe in a veil beyond which humans go, to small eternities, when this life is over. But I didn't realise that the dark woods can hold so much light. Every last bit of colour in the evening sky lingered in the trees. Every way I looked, light came towards me, and even the potholes of rain on the pathway sucked in the twilight and gathered it and threw it back at me.

And it's strange how, being so far removed from electric light, I could hear voices deep within me, and feel great realisations dawning, like in a dream. For example, it's not the woods that frighten me; it is death. The unbearable feeling is not that I will eventually be annihilated but that things will go on and I won't be there. I suppose that's what kept me at parties when I was young. I could never bear to leave a buzzing room.

Like dreams, realisations come in two parts. After the thought of death, which made me shiver, I remembered again the morning's greeting card, and so I reached out my hands in the wood and sensed the breath of twilight on them, and knew instantly that I had reached a moment of the day that is commonly described as bliss.

“Ireland's problems are big, but they are absolutely nothing compared to the problems people face in Afghanistan in their day-to-day lives”

Why did you choose your destination? Emigrants share their stories on our blog

Zero: I chose London for the simple reason that I was offered work there. There were additional benefits like being close to home, having cousins over here and already knowing the city. If I was offered a job anywhere I would have gladly moved - Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand - it's all about the work. But I do realise that it's not that simple for a lot of others - I came to London when I was 28 with no responsibilities or commitments and I have loved it here every day since I arrived.

Brian: A Canadian visa was the easiest to get as I'd used my Australian one. Not much thought put into it. Three years here now.

Jenny: I chose France because I want to speak the language fluently. I'm a language assistant in a small town near Strasbourg for the year but I hope I can stay even after the contract ends. I've made some wonderful friends.

Anon: I chose Brazil partly because my wife is from there but

also because it's an exciting place due to the stunning growth of this country. The abundance of Irish people, acting more "Irish" than they ever did at home, is something that turned me off Australia in particular.

Ciarán: I chose the United States, as I had already been there on a J1, so had friends, connections and a job over here. Also, the benefit of having a friendly and powerful Irish-American community cannot be measured.

Denni (Melbourne, Australia): My boyfriend is Aussie, and it was easy for me to get on a working holiday visa. From there I got sponsored. It's not as easy as people make out, but if you've a skill (any practical skill, really) it can be done. As Anon mentioned, there's a lot of maudlin Irish around as well who drink all night and live the backpacker lifestyle. That's grand for a holiday, but it's not for me.

Caroline: I chose London because of a man. Sounds stupid but

London worked out okay. The man, alas, did not.

Laura (Dubai): Like most people we moved here because of a job. My husband was relocated unexpectedly and we moved at short notice when our son was only 9 weeks old. Nine months later we are glad we did. Earning tax-free money has nearly doubled our income and has allowed me the pleasure of being a stay-at-home mum.

SMALL PRINT

The game Alec Baldwin couldn't stop playing

THE AEROPLANE doors were closed but there was a delay on the runway, so actor Alec Baldwin (below) continued playing Words With Friends on his smartphone despite the fact that all mobile devices were supposed to have been switched off. His actions got him thrown off an American Airlines flight from New York to Los Angeles on Tuesday and had many people asking: "What is Words With Friends?"

To anyone who has played this cult game, which is similar to Scrabble, it would have been no surprise to hear that

Baldwin had locked himself into the aircraft's toilet so that he could continue playing the game while waiting for take-off.

Since its debut two years ago, Words With Friends has been among the most downloaded smartphone apps and has built up a huge following.

Baldwin's spokesman, Matthew Hiltzik, speaking about the aircraft incident, said: "Alec loves Words With Friends so much that he was willing to leave a plane for it."

Words With Friends is a multiplayer word game typically played on a phone. Players receive a random assortment of letters on tiles and use them to form words on grid. The game is played against other online users over the phone.

Players can take as long as they like over their word choices, meaning that some games go on for weeks.

The phone app sends a ping alert telling players when when it's their turn to play.

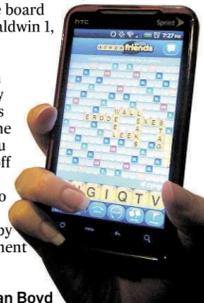
People get so involved in Words With

Friends that it has been labelled "the crystal meth of language games".

The game's maker, Zynga, immediately pressed the Baldwin incident into service as a marketing tool. The company started a Twitter campaign, #letAlecPlay, and released an "official statement", a Words With Friends game board that spelt out "A Baldwin 1, American Air O".

The Words With Friends community rushed to Baldwin's defence. While some people said that you do need to switch off your mobile device when asked to do so on an aircraft, no one was surprised by Baldwin's commitment to the Words With Friends cause.

- Brian Boyd



Puppets of the class war?

LIBERAL Hollywood depicting a successful businessman as evil? That's not new!" said Fox News presenter Eric Bolling, complaining about the villain of the new Muppets movie, Tex Richman. "We're teaching our kids class warfare. Where are we: communist China?" asked Bolling.

"I just wish liberals could leave little kids alone," added fellow host Andrea Tantaros.

It's not the first time that kids' entertainment has been branded leftie propaganda.

In 2005, innocent, asexual Spongebob Squarepants was accused of promoting homosexuality, apparently because he holds hands with his best friend, a starfish named Patrick. A Spongebob video was "potentially brainwashing kids",

Paul Batura, a spokesman for Focus on Family said.

Elsewhere, *Happy Feet* came under fire for its environmental message and for supposedly promoting a "gay lifestyle". James Dobson, also of Focus on Family, complained that it subliminally criticised the religious right too.

More recently, *Happy Feet Two* (above) has been criticised for supposedly promoting homosexuality, apparently because one tiny krill, voiced by Brad Pitt, says to his best friend: "No hanky-panky."

Political antagonism is a feature of US media, but pundits should remember that a penguin is sometimes just a penguin.

- Joe Griffin

