

Writer, collector, mother, *bon viveur*,  
campaigner: Orna Mulcahy delights  
in the company of Polly Devlin

# ALWAYS HERSELF

**T**WO pictures of author Polly Devlin stand out from all the other publicity shots. The first is on the invitation to the launch of her new book *Only Sometimes Looking Sideways*, a collection of her writing from *Image* magazine. The grainy print shows her in the middle of a family group, aged about six, smiling for the camera, wearing a Fair Isle jumper and a hair ribbon like a butterfly about to take off from her head. She could be any child in 1950s Ireland, lined up with numerous siblings against a pebble-dashed wall.

The other photograph, in the archives of *The Irish Times*, is a society portrait worthy of *Country Life*. Taken in the late 1970s, it shows the beautiful Polly Garnett with her three daughters, Rose, Daisy and Bay. Her girls are dressed in frothy, white, lace dresses and so is she. They look like princesses in a modern-day fairytale.

There is a fairytale quality to Polly Devlin's life. How else, if not by some sort of magic, did the little girl in the Fair Isle jumper manage to turn herself so completely into the vision of wealth, glamour and contentment in the second photograph? How did she make the leap from rural Tyrone into English high society without being propelled by some more delicate force than plain, hard, claw-your-way-up ambition? How did she manage to marry a rich man, burrow into the very heart of the English establishment and conquer literary Bohemia too? How did she do all this and still hold on to the

essence of the early photograph, the sense of belonging to a large, close-knit Irish family?

The answer isn't a secret because she has written about her life every step of the way. Even as a child she was aware of living two separate lives. On the outside she was a Catholic, growing up in a Protestant province, English but not English. Her inner life an epic story in which the Devlins were kings.

Her childhood in Ardboe on the shores of Lough Neagh is so well chronicled that by now it has passed into mythology, she says. She wrote about it beautifully in an autobiography *All Of Us There*, and the story continues through *Dora*, her novel about a girl who grows up in Northern Ireland and lands herself in London's upper ranks, and through her writings in the *New Statesman*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and *The Irish Times*. Her brother Barry, a film-maker, has drawn on the same source in his work and their sister Marie, who is married to Seamus Heaney, has also written about their childhood.

But with Polly it is not all looking back through sepia-tinted snapshots. Her new collection is an exhilarating spin through the rest of her marvellously diverse life in London, Gloucestershire, New York, Paris, Venice — wherever takes her fancy. She destroys a West End shop when it won't replace a wonky pair of boots, she feasts on Krug champagne and Beluga caviar with George Melly, she remembers her good friend Peggy Guggenheim's fabulous



*Polly Devlin:  
'She was born  
to be grand  
and she knew  
it very early  
on.'*

*Photograph:  
Frank Miller.  
Below left is  
the invitation  
photograph,  
with her  
brother and  
sisters*



Venetian palace and tiny turquoise slippers. She flits through the south of France, St Petersburg; she shops with her daughters in New York. She poaches their Dolce & Gabbana and Prada things when she feels thin.

She was born to be grand and she knew it very early on. As a child she would sit in the "soft, flea-ridden silence" of the attic, learning the minutiae of grand, country-house living from a 10-volume manual of Edwardian housekeeping. Later she devoured copies of *Vogue* magazine, her "missive from another planet" that told her what was happening to

hemlines from London to New York. It was *Vogue* magazine that changed her life by giving her first prize in its talent contest in 1964. The prize was a job on the magazine "and so it happened that one day I was on the bus to Belfast and the next I was on the aeroplane to Tehran to interview the Empress Farah Diba".

**P**ITCHED into the *haute bourgeois* world of *Vogue*, where the secretaries had titles and everyone had a country house to go to at the weekend, she had no difficulty in fitting

right in. "I was perfectly at home there. We were brought up in a certain kind of way and had nothing to jettison. I didn't have to jettison U and non-U speech. We called a lavatory a lavatory."

What would she have done if she had stayed in Ardboe? Become a school teacher, marry the doctor and become bitter, she once surmised in an interview. Instead, she was a girl about town, best friends with Jean Shrimpton, in with David Bailey, interviewing Janis Joplin and Eunice Shriver, having regular injections of B12 vitamins in her bottom from a fashionable New York doctor ("a far cry from Dr Brown's surgery in Coagh"), having a huge amount of fun. To cap it all, she married a rich man, Old Etonian Andy Garnett, an industrialist to whom she has stayed happily married for 30 years. Not often seen, he sounds heroic. She says he has never reproached her for anything in all those 30 years.

They met at a dinner party he hosted in his house in the East End of London. She was there with a Dior model who intended to ask Andy to marry her that night. Instead, he asked Polly to marry him and, after two years, she agreed.

How did she pull it all off? Being beautiful was a help. Big eyes, great cheekbones and blonde hair will usually do the trick but it is her charm and her stories that cast the real spell. Fascinating to listen to,

she talks in long, fluid sentences, weaving a web of ideas and just as you begin to think she is losing the thread, she rounds it off nicely with a brilliant quotation or with an irreverent swipe at someone, usually herself. She is a brilliant hostess. She gives huge parties where everyone is spoiled with the best food and drink and sent away with a present. It is no wonder the society columnist Nigel Demster once put her at the top of his list of the 10 most captivating women in Britain.

She is a shameful collector not only of ideas and quotations, but of things. She has several houses and each is stuffed to the rafters. There is standing room only in her Dublin drawing-room, so crammed is it with lovely old furniture, books and paintings, blue and white pots, porcelain dogs, pots of fresh flowers, tapestries, the whole English country-house look. Sitting in the midst of all this acquired splendour, she talks about the other pleasures in her life — walking through a wood full of bluebells and hearing the cuckoo, walking through her fields in Somerset. "I don't want to sound like Pollyanna but my greatest possession is that I have fields and lands.

"Rousseau, who I only came to later in life, talks about finding truth in simple things. But that only comes from not having to work from nine to five. There isn't anyone who wouldn't expand if they didn't have to get in the car or the train and go to work. I am blessed that my life has not been in front of a computer, or somewhere where I don't want to be. The greatest happiness in life is being where you want to be. When you don't have to go to work, you choose your own company."

Blessed by good things — every day, she says, she counts her blessings — she is also "harried by furies". She worries about and campaigns against cruelty to children.

Her own children are now grown up and living in London and New York but they are very close and her girls measure themselves against their mother, anxious to achieve the milestones she reached in her day. She perfectly describes the melancholy of being a mother. "When you are a mother you are a hostage to fortune. A plane falls out of the sky, a car crashes, a virus — always underlying the happiness is a foreboding; that underlying sadness heightens the happiness."

● *Only Sometimes Looking Sideways* by Polly Devlin is published by The O'Brien Press, price £6.99.