

# The Irish EXAMINER

America's Leading Irish Newspaper

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**ALSO INSIDE**

**Angela Collins O'Mahoney,  
Ireland's Only Steeplejill**



**NEVER FORGET!**

# SteepleJill

In her own words, Angela Collins O'Mahoney tells the story of her life, detailing the drive and determination that led her to own her own successful business, be lauded by her peers and overcome the challenges that we all face in our pursuit of our life goals

I was asked to write my autobiography because my story is inspirational, and it gives hope to people of all walks of life. It confirms that a person can come from anywhere and go anywhere. It is entirely up to the person themselves. One does not have to be rich or famous to start a business. One can fail and you only fail if they stop trying. My book tells this story.

**M**y family lived on a small farm at Enagh, near the village of Kilkishen, Co. Clare, Ireland

We were a family of six children plus my parents. I was the youngest with four older brothers and one sister. We lived on a farm and I often heard my parents talking when sitting around the fire that we had plenty in the early years producing milk, meat, eggs, potatoes, vegetables and how they sold their produce to buy the necessities like clothes, shoes, and to pay bills.

Life was normal and happy for those first ten years of marriage until November 1944 when my sister died aged seven and a half and their world fell apart. They never got over her death. My dad became an alcoholic and my mother took care of him and us until each one went out to work.

A family can become disadvantaged for various reasons and having grown up in a situation where alcohol played havoc with our family life I was encouraged to write my life's story in a book that shows that despite fear and hardship early in life, you can put that behind you and still do well in life.

Because of her loss my mother was often very sad and tired due to having to work both in the fields and in the home. She was very soft hearted and asked us to help with chores but at that exact time we normally developed headaches or sore fingers and she did not insist and that contributed to her having to work so hard.

Back in the 1950s most boys left school after doing the Primary Certificate aged about twelve or thirteen and went to train for a trade or work on farms or in factories as did my four brothers.

Shannon Airport was set up at this time and two were employed there and two emigrated to England when they became old enough to travel.

Getting love from both parents and seeing Mam's determination to survive stood to us. The many parcels and letters we received from my Dad's family in America greatly helped.

Seeing my Dad destroy our lives and his own, was tough but that

was a huge lesson as we ensured we did not follow in his footsteps.

My Dad had seventeen in his family and all emigrated, to the USA except his oldest brother who went to England and an older sister who remained at home.

As he was the youngest he took care of his parents and inherited the farm.

Sometime around 1952 one of my Dad's older brothers died in America and left money to us (back then it was called a legacy). I recall the great excitement when it arrived and to ensure Dad did not spend it on alcohol, Mam took it immediately to the bank in Tulla, Co. Clare and took me along.

She lodged it in both names with the condition that I would receive it at twenty-one or when I married into a farm. It was to be my Dowry.

Many may not know what a Dowry was but it was significant in Ireland as one would know if they watched the film "The Quiet Man" with John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara.

My parents spoke endlessly about me being provided for and that my future was secure because I could now marry any farmer when the time came.

I cannot emphasize enough how significant this was, but it really annoyed me because at ten or eleven I did not know what my parents were talking about. As time went on I knew I would not marry a farmer having seen how hard my mother worked in all kinds of weather, but to them, especially my mother, the land was God. She used to say she would have been 'out on the road' only for the farm that she worked and the produce she sold.

I kept telling Mam and Dad I had plans to get educated and often thought of being a nun after a visit from a Missionary Sister from Africa to our school.

My father told me in no uncertain terms no money was going with me to the convent - he needed it and said, "it will stay here where it is wanted."

They were making inquiries about single rich farmers and were suggesting marriage to me on a regular basis.

They talked endlessly about the benefit of being friendly with those young men who would likely inherit their parents land and that I should consider marrying one of them.

They even promised me their home and farm to attract an even larger land-owner and often told me we could join the two farms

and later they followed through and gave it to me.

I did get some offers from two of those men and never knew if my parents put them up to it, I never asked, as the answer might be embarrassing.

I know half the county knew of my Dowry, especially from my father when he had a few pints in him but also from my mother.

Most parents were not in favour of educating daughters back then because women ended up marrying and taking care of the home and family but I held tough to my plan.

I persuaded them to pay for the uniform and let me go to the Convent of Mercy in Tulla, about four miles away.

However, I left there after my second year as it would take five years to the Leaving Certificate and my mother was harassing me.

Somewhere, I heard of a year-long course that was run in Limerick City where girls were trained to do office work. I decided that was for me and went to live with an aunt there.

Soon after, my parents began the ten-mile journey to Limerick selling their animals and they would meet me and bring me to Hogan's Restaurant where all the farmers ate and I loved my food so I went with them.

Again and again, they were introducing me to the other farmers and telling me who they were and who had the most land, etc. but I told them I would never milk cows but my mother would say, "with your dowry ye will be able to hire help."

She tried everything to get me home and take a position in a local shop and save my wages to increase my Dowry, as the more money a girl had the larger the farm she could marry into, but I ate the free dinner and pretended I was listening when in fact I had no interest in their suggestions.

While I loved my parents, and missed them when I moved to Limerick, I did not succumb to returning home.

I loved the Commercial Course I was doing in Limerick. We learned typing, shorthand, and book-keeping and when completed I got employed immediately as a secretary to a local steeplejack company.

Though living with an elderly aunt who was kind, loving but controlling, my real life began at sixteen and I was happy.

I had expected to work in a grand office downtown in Limerick but instead I was in a builder's yard in a makeshift office that did not impress me one bit but when I dis-

cussed that with my employer he gave me free rein to improve it.

I thought things must be bad if he felt I could, but taking on the task helped grow my confidence and we really got on well.

I was very respectful by nature and religion being very strong I worked hard and loved the challenge.

I was so green and naïve, when the phone rang the first day I answered it upside down as I had never used a telephone until that day. I was glad my employer was not there to see me checking for the man inside the phone!

My boss employed a builder who had built a nice office. I made curtains for the windows and soon we had a proper place to work and impress customers.

Then one day my employer shocked me when he told me I needed to buy a car - I only owned a bicycle and was earning £1.10s per week. He told me about Hire Purchase and how I would pay for it.

When I turned seventeen and had only been working for one year I bought the smallest car on the market and Mr. Lynch gave me a wage increase and expenses for using it in the business to transport materials around Ireland, take employees to work, collect cheques and, because I did not drink or smoke, that allowance paid for the loan and upkeep.

It went over my head really but I felt it was most unusual for a girl to own a car so I felt very lucky.

I absolutely loved dancing and now had the car to go with my friends to the Ceilis (dancing to Irish Music) especially the famous Tulla Ceili playing at the Marquee in Kilkishen, then back to Limerick's Jetland Ballroom to enjoy Donie Collins or the Royal Showband - as it was the Showband era and it only cost about five shillings to attend.

I went back to Kilkishen each Sunday morning to take my parents to mass but immediately returned to my life that I thoroughly enjoyed in historic Limerick City.

Then one day my employer sent me to deliver materials to steeplejacks working in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

When I arrived, I honked the horn in my car to get the attention of the men working at the top of the tall chimneys but they did not take any heed of me in the busy and noisy town so I climbed up the one hundred and twenty foot tall chimney stack to tell the steeplejacks that I had their materials and

this allowed me to return quickly to my office and impress my employer.

That was the beginning of my climbing career as a steeplejack (Steeplejill). It was unusual back in early 1960s to see a woman climbing tall chimneys, working on church roofs or even being on a construction site.

I was very happy there for six years and it was only when my employer died suddenly I discovered my inner strengths and started my own business.

I had just married John O'Mahony a member of the Garda Síochána, and at twenty-three, being my own boss, I became aware of my unusual situation.

Climbing and site work did not sit well with me, so I often dressed as a man just to go unnoticed.

I felt that everyone presumed I should be at home looking after my family and my home but I had my opportunity and I took it. That, of course, could have been the way I saw things but when I engaged with customers and fellow employees nobody said anything, instead they simply offered to help in every way.

I knew a good deal about the steeplejack business after typing quotations and sending invoices and visiting sites but I had employed very qualified steeplejacks in any case.

When John was off duty from his garda work, we would carry out contracts just the two of us. I remember he would grit blast with our new machine and my job was to keep the pot filled for him.

I always tucked my hair underneath a man's cap and I wore a man's overall and a heavy buttoned up coat so no one took a blind bit of notice whether I was a man or a woman.

However, that was not always the case as I would be staying in Bed and Breakfasts and some people found that it was strange for a woman to be away from home and pregnant. I got noticed once when working in Kinsale Church, County Cork and luckily got the attention of the media.

I was invited onto the Late Late Show with Gay Byrne on two occasions and with Ireland only having one television channel myself and my business became known all over Ireland after that show.

On my first appearance, I was heavily pregnant when I climbed the church and on that same night Stanley Baker and Phyllis Diller were on.

I was petrified but she helped me greatly and when she went on she spoke about me and announced that I was going to have a baby and the audience gasped at seeing the video of me on ladders.

Though I was twenty-five years old I was very nervous being on television for the first time and telling my story publicly.

My climbing story was on newspapers and magazines, followed by other television appearances as years passed.

To this day, the media are interested in writing and taking pictures of steeplejacks climbing up the sheer face of a building, a fact that we appreciated because we could not afford to pay for that type of advertising.

Steeplejack work is not as plentiful now due to the tall chimneys being demolished. It is becoming a dying trade since the introduction of hoists and cranes. ☺

Next week, in part two of this autobiography, Angela continues her story detailing the continued development of her business, her work in building a golf course and her drive to overcome any hurdles in her way and become one of Ireland's most successful business-women.



Angela Collins O'Mahoney

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**ALSO INSIDE**  
**Arsenal Win A Record**  
**13th FA Cup Final**



# STEEPLEJILL

The Conclusion Of Our Exclusive Interview With Angela Collins O'Mahoney

When I started the business, steeplejacks were in great demand as we had work on churches, convents and we had several manufacturing plants with tall chimney stacks.

We were so busy that my husband John left his secure pensionable job as a Garda and joined me. The first two years passed quickly as I was pregnant but still travelled around Ireland with my suitcase packed just in case I went into labor while up the country.

However, I was back in Limerick when our daughter Susan was born soon after my appearance on the Late Late Show.

Life then got very busy and wonderful but not for long as I had a serious car accident when travelling back from Millstreet, Co. Cork and Susan was five months old when a lorry backed onto a main road and I got badly injured.

I had to get ninety-eight stitches on my face, which was a setback, but life went on.

The following year I received a telephone call from an American gentleman who arrived in Ireland to carry out a contract near Shannon Airport quite close to where my parents originally came from and close to my own home.

I took the call and immediately knew he wanted "Man Talk" but I persisted and made an appointment with him.

I arrived to meet him on the site

which was at the top of a mountain. He was a lovely man, very gracious but I was scared that I would lose out being a woman. I talked - I could talk for Ireland! but he eventually asked when is Mr. Collins coming? and I had to explain and say I was the Managing Director of Collins Steeplejacks and there was no Mr. Collins and then convinced him my company could carry out the work.

He hired us, and a lifelong friendship began, which was amazing as my face was badly scared and I had little confidence.

He returned to America and not only did we get that contract but he went on to hire my steeplejacks, John and myself to do installation work all over the world. That was a real surprise and I could not believe my good fortune but better was to come.

Knowing now that they were happy with our steeplejacks and the service we gave, I decided one Christmas to visit Boston with John and try and meet the owner of the company to persuade him of the advantages in having a European base in Ireland.

I also told him and his directors of the grants given to start-up companies by the IDA Industrial Development Authority.

I explained that there were capital grants, training grants and that Ireland had sales offices throughout the world (then called CTT, now Enterprise Ireland) who can

assist in selling products manufactured in Ireland.

Also, Ireland had a low tax rate of twelve and a half percent which was very attractive.

The Americans were very happy to hear of this and came here, built their manufacturing facility, and availed of these benefits and, of course, Ireland's highly skilled and educated work force.

I offered four-acres at a very reasonable price and for that I received shares in the company. Life could not have been better. I kept wondering: how did all this come about?

I was Managing Director of this new factory, and of my own Collins Steeplejack company and went on to have our son John and another daughter named Martina and Hilda over the following years. So, life was hectic but enjoyable.

Many visitors and buyers visited the plant and one group asked to go golfing and though John or I had never golfed we took them to the most up market golf course at Dromoland Castle.

I felt silly trying to hit the ball, did many twirlies but did not get the hang of it. We stood aside and let the good golfers pass but had a great evening laughing and chatting.

Now, we had moved to an old Georgian house in Clonlara County Clare which had sixty-eight acres of land with it so on the way home that afternoon I said to John that we could build our own golf course on our land as there is a niche in the market.

We then converted our sixty-eight-acre farm to a nine-hole golf course and the late famous champion golfer Christy O'Connor officially opened it in 1986.

It was a real success as we catered for guests and school groups and had tours from as far away as Japan visit but then I got ill and sold it to an English company some years later who developed it further but nevertheless it was a profitable venture for us.

Later I got colon cancer and during the check-ups they discovered I needed four stents as I had heart problems, which were in our family so it was expected but soon that was all sorted and I got back on my feet.

I looked back at my life and the many knocks but realize that being disadvantaged in childhood helped me.

It was in my opinion as good as a Degree; having been accustomed to having little luxuries made me very appreciative.

Santa never found our house and many others but that was fine as we had love most of the time when Dad was sober but I really appreciated everything that came my way and took nothing for granted.

I had the most wonderful staff, we were more like family than employee and employer.

Being deprived of heat and comfort on occasions made me look after my business so I made sure we offered a good service in order that we never lost a customer so, surrounded by a wonderful dedicated staff, we always tried to give 100 per cent and often went beyond the normal aiming to attain that.

My parents passed on their values and a deep belief in God, which sustained me during my life and we in turn passed those values onto our children and they are doing the same with their children.

This I feel is very important especially now when we have a lot of confusion in our world. Parents can be stressed, pressurized, and confused with all the new technology and must be vigilant.

I wrote this book with all that in mind and use my time giving talks to students, and after dinner speeches and passing on this advice gained from my experiences.

I believe that parents should give their children pocket money but only if they work for it. Children usually follow in their parent's foot steps so setting a good example and providing them with love is vitally important.

It is difficult to keep young people from their iPhone and iPads but it is important to guide them to use those for education as we are being replaced by machines and they need to start thinking of their job prospects for the future. It is so great to read about young teenagers being entrepreneurs.

Work is often thought of as stressful but only if we think we should not be doing it, if we are brought up to understand that work is necessary we can thoroughly enjoy these 24/7 demands in a caring, respectful, and compassionate environment.

With the right approach, hard work can be gratifying and raise our self-esteem but we need appreciation and respect while still understanding the need to be competitive.

From reviews and comments from readers, my book THE STORY OF IRELAND'S ONLY STEEPLEJILL is a great read. It is a family story and a journey that

ends with success despite a bleak and sad start.

It tells how women were expected to work in the 50s and 60s, and many tell me that my story takes the reader into my kitchen as if going for a cup of tea.

It is also funny in parts. More readers tell me it is very inspiring and emotional and makes the reader wonder if it is true - that a woman could do this, but of course it is, and that was only possible by working through problems and being close to our employees and the backing of your community.

Together we can do anything. It is not a self-help book and I know it shows sheer determination and that must always be the goal. Ask for help, and advice, there are so many who want to assist and especially old people with time on their hands who have so much wisdom.

Of course, I was very lucky to be one of the first woman to be a steeplejack (steeplejill) and the first woman to build a golf course and so this will be inspiring all by itself.

The great advantage I had was that I got so much attention from the media because of my unusual work. I never forget that I was lucky.

In interviews my employees were often asked how they felt working for a woman and would they trust a woman? This was a very genuine question in those days, as I felt unsure myself but I just kept pushing on. Now of course we have all to watch our Ps and Qs.

It was a wonderful life and I got many Awards which I felt undeserving of but they are nice to look back on now.

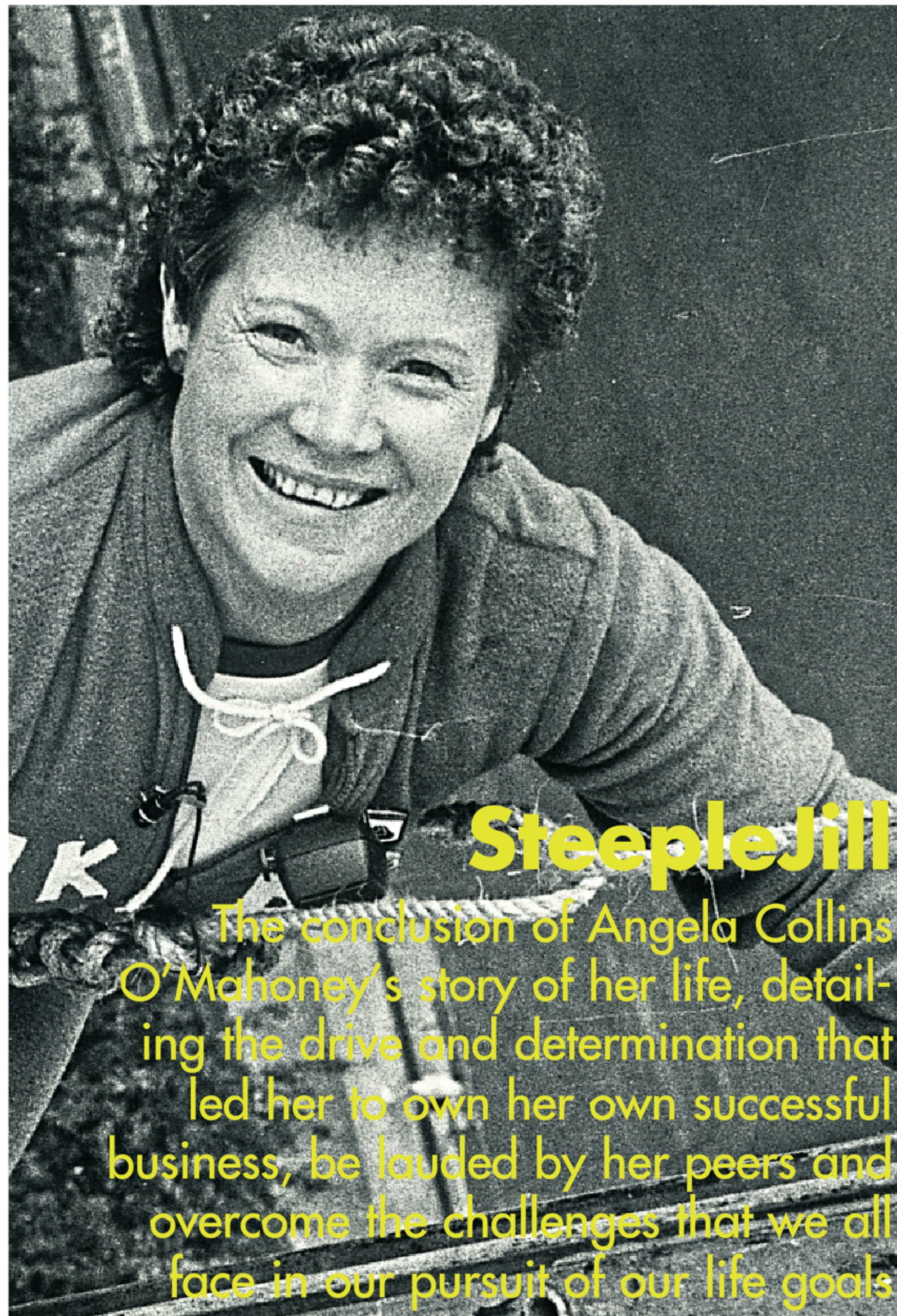
I was Ireland's First Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year in 1980, and won the Bowmaker Award for Irish Industry in 1986.

I was asked to participate in the celebrations of the Cork 800 Charter in 1985 and that was the highlight of my career.

John a proud Corkman was especially delighted when I was asked to climb the County Hall, and then to win the Great Race was the icing on the cake and I received an Honorary Doctorate for work in my community in 1992 presented to me by the then Taoiseach, Leader of our Country.

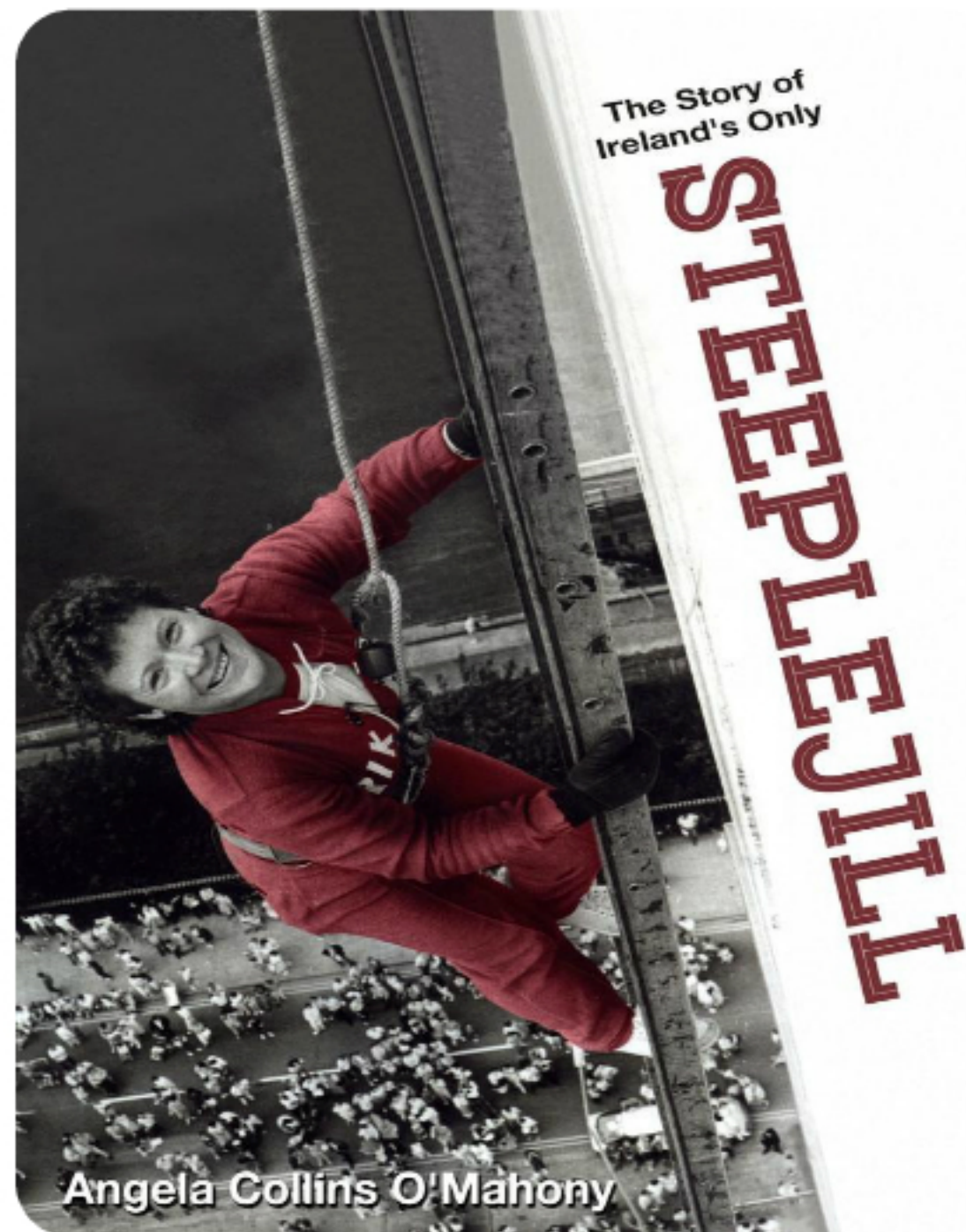
To the people who gave these awards and to the people who supported me I am most grateful.

To purchase a copy of "The Story of Ireland's Only Steeplejill" please visit [www.collinssteeplejacks.com](http://www.collinssteeplejacks.com)



## SteepleJill

The conclusion of Angela Collins O'Mahoney's story of her life, detailing the drive and determination that led her to own her own successful business, be lauded by her peers and overcome the challenges that we all face in our pursuit of our life goals



The Story of Ireland's Only

STEEPLEJILL

Angela Collins O'Mahoney