

November 2020



Photo: David Crocker

Parish Church: December picture for Aspects of Folkestone Calendar, out now.

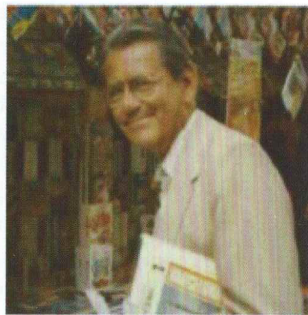
www.gofolkestone.org.uk

BOOK REVIEW

By Sheila Palmer

Little-Known Local Heroes

In 1989 I was taken on as the Registrar at the School of English Studies in Grimston Gardens, and I worked there, enrolling students from all over the world, for many happy years. On my first day I met a rather elegant gentleman who reminded me of James Stewart. This proved to be Peter O'Connell, who with his Swiss wife, Lea, founded the school in 1959.



Peter O'Connell in later years

When the couple died in the late 1990s, their daughter, Una Suseli, inherited a number of letters and diaries from which she has pieced together a fascinating memoir *The Absent Prince: In search of Missing Men*. As a teacher who has trained in Systemic Family Constellations, Una explores her grandparents' history, endeavouring to explain the varied characteristics of her parents from a psychological angle. All families have some secrets, and this is no exception. Her book tells of the complex relationship between highly intelligent, deeply introspective Peter, and the artistic and caring Lea. TB brought the couple together in Switzerland, and later prevented them from living together in the US as they had planned to do.

Researching the book, Una travelled widely, interviewing former friends and colleagues, and as well as the sometimes shocking personal family story, she also provides a considerable amount of social history, particularly about the shadier side of Switzerland. One grandfather was deployed at the border, not only to prevent invasion by the Nazis, but also to turn away Jewish refugees- evidently not considered "political". Some relatives appear to have been "Verdingkinder" – what today would be considered as child slavery. There is also the scandalous story of the beautiful *Flowergate* building, and its connection to Kearsney Abbey.

Despite many periods of separation, and Lea's long-standing love for another man, the couple's relationship endured, and this is a most interesting, warm and highly readable memoir about the founders of an important Folkestone business which encouraged multi-national understanding, and thrived here for fifty years.

A quote from a local shopkeeper says that Peter did a lot for Folkestone, and he is certainly one of our unrecognised benefactors. As well as being a highly regarded teacher, he supported numerous committees, the Adult Education Centre, the Folklore Festival and Folkestone Family Care. He was very fond of quoting Shakespeare, and I hope he would forgive my paraphrase in his memory – *A man who loved not well but too wisely*.

The Absent Prince: In search of Missing Men by Una Suseli O'Connell
Conrad Press. Paperback £9.99/Kindle edition £3.99

Una Suseli O'Connell

BY KATE NOBLE

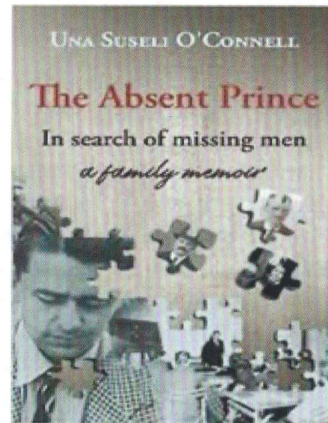
It's a rainy Wednesday morning and, from her Letchworth home of 20 years, Una Suseli O'Connell talks to Kate Noble, via Zoom, about the experiences that led her to write her first book: *The Absent Prince: in search of missing men*. Suseli's father, Peter O'Connell, founded the School of English Studies in Folkestone in 1959. After her parents died she inherited a great many letters and diaries which led her through a labyrinth of shocking and painful discoveries. She shares her experiences of the four years she spent writing the book, her memories of growing up in Folkestone in the 1970s and her current impressions of the town.

'Don't destroy something when you're angry', my husband Dan advised and so I stored the papers in the loft until I felt ready to revisit them. More than a decade later, the book I thought I was writing about the history of the School of English Studies, morphed into a family memoir.

At first, I cherry-picked the details, mindful that I didn't want to upset our daughters. Later I realised that what was important was how I told the story and not what I included. I needed to be curious and non-judgemental.

The research was like a jigsaw puzzle and letters and diary entries connected and provided me with more information. I was discovering things in real time too as I pieced it all together.

The most painful discovery was linked to the most comforting. Although my relationship with my parents was sometimes challenging, I came to understand the extent of their suffering. As I reflect on their strength, resilience and resourcefulness, I recognise that I have inherited some of those qualities and so have their granddaughters. In spite of their own sadness, Peter and Lea always had room in their hearts for acts of kindness to others.



I recognise now that knowing more about our ancestors helps us better understand who we are and all that we have inherited. I encourage everyone, whose parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are still alive, to ask them about their past and to record their stories as a gift for the next generation.

I love Folkestone and have happy memories of my childhood. Mum and I used to have tea at Bobby's (Debenhams) where Leo, dressed in a velvet smoking jacket played a white baby grand. Meanwhile, a mannequin walked between the tables, showcasing outfits. My mother would stop her as she passed to feel the fabric and inquire about colours and sizes. I do hope that the architectural dignity of the old 'Bobby's' building will be maintained.

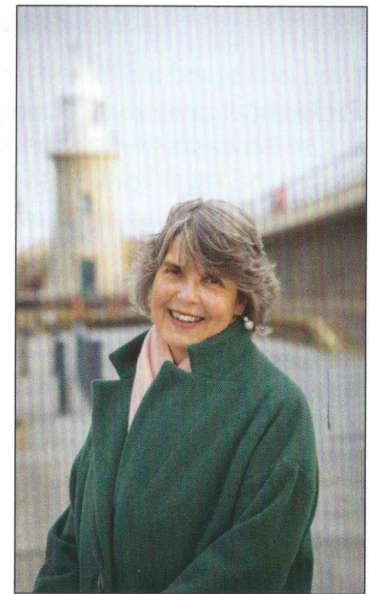
On summer evenings my father and I would go swimming at Sunny Sands and we always bought a pint of prawns for supper on the way home.

The Harbour Arm is a wonderful example of re-purposing. Last year, Dan and I went to Pintxos after reading Giles Coren's article in The Times. The chef was getting ready to go home but he still offered to cook for us. This friendly, unpretentious vibe that you find at the Arm and on the Old High Street epitomizes Folkestone for me. My hope is that the ambitious plans for the seafront will remain in keeping with the spirit and history of the town.

The School of English Studies in Grimston Gardens is now home to Earlscliffe, a 6th Form College. Peter O'Connell spent 8 years teaching in UK and US boarding schools so it feels appropriate that our family home is now a boarding school for foreign students.

The first chapter of *The Absent Prince* is available to read on www.unaoconnell.co.uk.

Copies of the book can be purchased at Marrin's Bookshop.



Una Suseli O'Connell