

TD demands answers after he received an extraordinary telephone call

BY ANY standards, it was an extraordinary phone call. In fact in all his 17 years as a TD, Paul McGrath had never received one quite like it. It was 9.20am on Tuesday, December 12 and the Westmeath TD could not believe what he was hearing.

Astounded, he listened as the taut, American-accented voice of 40-year-old Laura Barnes threatened him with legal action.

Ms Barnes, a twice-married rare book dealer and literary consultant, was appointed head of Dublin's James Joyce Centre on North Great Georges Street earlier this year.

The telephone threat had been sparked by a series of five Parliamentary Questions (PQs) submitted to Arts Minister John O'Donoghue.

One question named Ms Barnes and inquired how much she had received in consultancy payments from the State, a routine question frequently asked of Government Departments which hire private-sector consultants.

The other PQs were more searching...

Mr McGrath sought details of the National Library's purchase from Miss Barnes of 11 pages of lost Finnegans Wake manuscripts penned by James Joyce in the 1920s for €1.17million.

Ms Barnes had reportedly bought them at what later looked like a bargain price of a reported €400,000 and sold them on to the Library for a tidy profit approaching €800,000.

The precise details of the deal have never been made public. But the fact that a private individual with close links to the National Library and Ireland's Joycean community profited so handsomely has led some to question whether there was a conflict of interest.

Now her telephone conversation with Mr McGrath raises further questions about a saga involving more than a million euro of taxpayers' money.

Because when Ms Barnes made her call, Mr McGrath had not yet received answers to his questions from the Department of Arts.

Nor had the fact that he was raising them even been published on the official Dáil order paper.

Now the TD has written a lengthy letter of complaint to Dr Rory O'Hanlon, the Dáil Ceann Comhairle and chairman of the Oireachtas Committee on Procedure and Privilege (CPP).

The powerful committee is responsible for implementing and overseeing the rules and regulations in Leinster House.

In the strongly-worded letter, Deputy McGrath complains that he has never known anyone named in a PQ to contact him, let alone make legal threats.

HE describes how Ms Barnes told him 'she had taken legal advice' and would take legal action against him if he spoke outside the boundaries of parliamentary privilege.

'I was totally shocked by the receipt of this phone call,' he wrote, saying he felt it was an 'attempt to intimidate me into taking a different course of action'.

However, he also questions how Ms Barnes knew of the questions in advance of the publication of that Day's order paper.

Mr McGrath had submitted five questions, one of which did not even make that day's order paper. And yet when she called, Ms Barnes was clearly aware of all five questions.

And he demands an explanation from the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism as to how Ms Barnes was informed of his questions.

'If it is not the Department's policy, who made that decision and on what basis was it made,' the letter reads.

Yesterday, Mr McGrath said: 'In my 17 years in the Dáil I have asked

SPECIAL REPORT



by Michael O'Farrell

Investigative Correspondent

thousands of questions, many about third parties, and this is the first occasion I have been contacted by a third party like this.'

Recently, Ms Barnes said she had been simply contacted by the Department to confirm details in the responses officials were preparing to Mr McGrath's questions.

So just who is Laura Barnes?

Born Laura Rosenfeld in Cleveland, Ohio, she graduated from Columbia College, New York University and Harvard Business School before making her name as a rare book collector, thanks in part to her wealthy parents.

In previous interviews she has described making one of her first rare book purchases with the help of 'Daddy's credit card'.

On the success of several astute Joyce deals she founded Araby Books, a rare book dealership in New York specialising in 20th Century literature.

She is said to maintain a home in Westchester, upstate New York, and is a former editor at publishing company Free Press.

A ONE-TIME employee of the marketing division in Harper Collins, Laura Barnes also sits on the literary advisory board of The Modern World and was previously vice-president of rare book dealers Glenn Horowitz Booksellers. In May this year Laura explained to one paper: 'Rosenfeld is my birth or legal name and Barnes is my first married name, which I used for 20 years. Weldon was my second married name, and after that marriage ended I went back to Barnes. That's the name I use to pay my bills.'

Her first appearance on behalf of the Irish government came in 2003 when, styling herself Laura Weldon, she was appointed coordinator of the ReJoyce Dublin 2004 festival.

That position would see her receive €175,621 in 'fees and expenses to cover staffing and employee costs'.

Then in 2005 and 2006 she was hired as a consultant for the Beckett Centenary Festival, a position which cost the State another €105,674 in fees, staff costs and expenses.

This year she was also installed as the temporary director of the struggling James Joyce Centre which, bankrupt and faced with closure, was bailed out by the Government to the tune of €125,000 last year.

The Government has committed to spend another €250,000 on the venture by next summer after which a decision on its future will be made.

Given her expertise and success with the festivals, Ms Barnes was a likely candidate for the role.

According to Freedom of Information documents first obtained by Phoenix Magazine, Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism assistant secretary-general Niall O'Donnchu penned a memo suggesting that 'an agreed professional manager be installed' to give the James Joyce Centre 'a fighting chance'.

Having served with Laura Barnes on the Beckett Centenary Festival Committee, Mr O'Donnchu would have been more than familiar with her organisational ability.

Three days later a departmental memo, this time from principal officer Chris Flynn, noted that the new director should be 'a Joycean specialist with the skills of good organisation and persuasion, a person who would be seen as neutral with no axe to grind. Someone like Laura Barnes would be ideal'.

The prestigious appointment

capped an extraordinary string of back-to-back successes for the rare book dealer from Ohio.

But her most profitable achievement, carried out in the mist of all her other responsibilities, is the profit she made on the sale to the National Library of the latest rare Joyce manuscript find.

Ms Barnes completed the manuscript deal under her family name, Laura Rosenfeld.

The saga began towards the end of 2004 when Ms Barnes heard of the existence of previously unknown Joyce notes in Paris.

The opportunity was too good to ignore.

As she would later tell The Irish Times: 'I was in London, and got a call from another English bookseller, whose specialty is not modernism, who said: "I'm calling to let you know there is this material, you should go look at it." I got on the first train.'

Arriving in Paris she headed straight for number 12, Rue Saint Sulpice, the library of renowned book dealer Jean-Claude Vrain.

Vrain, a sprightly, silver-haired man, owns an impressive Latin Quarter premises stacked floor to ceiling with rare leather-bound

tomes. He had acquired six large paper sheets containing 11 pages of text written between April and August 1923 as Joyce struggled to conceptualise what would later become Finnegans Wake. The manuscripts appear to be the earliest surviving drafts of the book, penned a full 16 years before the work was eventually completed and published.

A significant portion of the text was never used and is therefore unknown, and six of the pages appear to have been dictated by a poorly-sighted Joyce to his wife Nora Barnacle.

THE precise origin of the papers remains unclear. But according to Sotheby's they were seized from Joyce's Paris flat in 1939 as he fled the Nazi advance on the French capital. Having left his rent unpaid, Joyce's landlord is said to have taken anything he could from the flat, later selling it at a 1945 auction in the Hotel Drouot. Paris book dealer

Maurice Bazy is said to have purchased the Joyce lot in 1945. After his death, Vrain bought his entire shop and contents from Bazy's family. Surveying the pages excitedly but carefully, Ms Barnes must have known of their value immediately.

'I wasn't the only person to see the documents. But I was the person who figured out they were good and undervalued, and I stepped up to the plate.'

'My information was good, and that's why I stay in the rare-book business,' she told the Sunday Times earlier this year.

On December 8, 2004 she became the new owner of the treasured Joyce manuscripts for a figure reputed to have been €400,000.

She has always declined to confirm the purchase price saying only: 'Yes the numbers are big. But I'm still working. I haven't retired.'

Just nine days after her purchase, London auction firm Sotheby's met with National Library director Aonghus O hAonghusa and the library's resident Joyce expert, Dr Luca Crispi.

After three months of negotiations, on March 15, the sale was agreed for €1.17million. To facili-

The American blonde, threats of legal action and an extremely handsome profit on James Joyce's lost manuscript