

Mulcahy, Neillí

by Linde Lunney

Mulcahy, Neillí (1925–2012), fashion designer, was born in Dublin on 27 February 1925, the second youngest of six children (three girls and three boys) of Gen. Richard Mulcahy (qv), IRA chief of staff and politician, and Mary ('Min') Mulcahy (qv) (née Ryan), a founding member of Cumann na mBan. Richard Mulcahy was not in government at the time of her birth, though he had been minister for defence (1923–4). The family was not well off, despite her father's standing in public life, and Min Mulcahy helped provide for them by running what was effectively a small farm in the Dublin suburb of Rathmines. Many of Neillí's uncles and aunts were notably involved in various aspects of the struggle for independence. Her aunts included Mary Kate Ryan (qv), Phyllis Ryan (qv) (1895–1983) and Agnes Ryan (qv); her mother's brother was James Ryan (qv) (1891–1970), a government minister, and her father's brother was Patrick Mulcahy (qv). Other relatives by marriage or otherwise included Seán T. O'Kelly (qv), Eoin Ryan (qv) and Eoin O'Malley (qv). Her brother Risteard Mulcahy (1922–2017) was a distinguished cardiologist.

Neillí's aunt Joanna Ryan ('Mother Stanislaus') (1877–1942) was a prominent member of the Loreto order of nuns, and largely responsible for establishing Loreto Hall, a residence for women university students. Neillí followed her aunts and sisters to Loreto on the Green, then spent a year in UCD studying science, but was always more interested in fashion, and left UCD to study dressmaking in St Mary's College of Domestic Science, Cathal Brugha Street. She then graduated from the Grafton Academy of Dress Designing, studied in a Paris academy in 1951, and afterwards spent six months being trained in the demanding standards of Parisian haute couture in the salon and workrooms of Jacques Heim. She recalled that she was made to sew thirty-four buttons on a dress at one sitting, lest her hand position alter and change the finish on the garment.

On returning to Dublin in 1952, Neill Mulcahy opened her own couture workshop in South Frederick Street, with three employees she trained herself. In 1953 she received a major boost when singled out for an award by Elsa Schiaparelli, the internationally renowned fashion designer, who was a visiting judge at that year's National Agricultural and Industrial Development Association show. Mulcahy presented her first collection in the large drawing room of the family home, Lissenfield, Rathmines, in January 1955, to considerable acclaim, launching her career in couture and made-to-measure tailoring. Neillí Mulcahy garments were recognisable because of the quality of the finish and cut, and especially because of her use of traditional but reworked Irish fabrics, such as tweed and wool. This was the main theme of Irish couture in the 1950s, as designers sought to update styling and make luxury items from folk-life materials. Mulcahy worked with enthusiastic entrepreneurs in the textile industry, such as Emily Wynne (qv) and her sisters

of Avoca Handweavers, and William McNutt of the McNutt Weaving Company in Downings, Donegal, to introduce new techniques, colours and finishes to tweed and linen. Her tailored wool suits were notably easy to wear, never outlandish or over-complicated, and she was one of the few designers to insist that women, like men, needed pockets. Mulcahy was noted for her use of fine knitted or woven woollen materials, handprinted by Michael McInerney in London, and she favoured bright hues (generally more popular in America than at home).

She was fortunate in having so many relatives in the upper ranks of Irish society who could help promote her collections. Her aunt Mary Kate O'Kelly, whose husband was president of Ireland (1945–59), for instance, was happy to wear Mulcahy dresses and ball gowns when on official business in Ireland and abroad, as on the first visit to America of an Irish president (1959). The success of Sybil Connolly (qv) in America also opened doors for the younger designer, and Mulcahy exported much of her output to the United States, as well as to Germany. Her 1967 collection was presented on a transatlantic liner, and in 1968 she showed her designs at a society luncheon fashion event in Chicago. In 1962 she was a founder (along with Irene Gilbert (qv) and Ib Jorgensen) of the Irish Haute Couture Group to promote Irish fashion abroad, and travelled often in support of this initiative.

Mulcahy also regularly won contracts to supply uniform suits for the women who were entering the workforce in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1963 she was awarded the prestigious contract to supply uniforms for Aer Lingus air hostesses, in Kelly green tweed, and also designed uniforms for receptionists in the Great Southern Hotels, for 1,200 Allied Irish Banks staff, hostesses on CIÉ trains, and staff in Shannon Duty Free shops.

However, couture standards came to be regarded as old-fashioned and too expensive, and Mulcahy's company failed to make the transition into manufacturing ready-to-wear garments. Casual wear and eventually sportswear made gains at the expense of the ladylike tailored and accessorised outfits of the 1950s. Increasingly, her designs lost ground as Irish women followed trends starting in Milan or New York, rather than in Dublin. Mulcahy's use of Irish fabrics, and especially the self-consciously 'Irish' tropes (for example, naming one of her creations 'Stirabout'), seemed dated and even unsophisticated to younger women in the 1960s. Customers may not have realised that even the labels in couture garments had to be Irish made, or else huge extra duties were payable. Mulcahy criticised government policy and lack of support for the Irish fashion industry, but had to accept that her version of Irish fashion had had its day. She closed her workshop on 1 July 1969.

She maintained an interest in the industry, designing tweed garments for at least one retailer, and serving as an adviser to the government on fashion and garment production. In particular, she kept up her connection for many years with the Grafton Academy, by adjudicating students' graduating collections and offering informed,

incisive and constructive criticism of their work, which substantially assisted the development of many young designers.

Mulcahy married (28 April 1956) Tommy Bacon, a Dublin solicitor; they had seven daughters. She insisted on working outside the home after marriage, and even after their children were born. Though never as much of a self-publicist as Sybil Connolly, Mulcahy recognised that her own career had been of significance in Irish fashion history, and donated her archive to the National Museum of Ireland. Her work featured in a pioneering exhibition curated by Elizabeth McCrum in the Ulster Museum in 1996, recognising the skills and artistry of 1950s Irish designers, as well as in a one-woman retrospective of her career from 1951 to 1969 on display in the National Museum from 2007.

Neillí Mulcahy Bacon died in Dublin on 6 May 2012. After a funeral in the church of the Sacred Heart, Donnybrook, she was buried in Mount Venus cemetery.

Irish newspapers, esp.: *Ir. Press*, 4 Mar. 1968; *Ir. Independent*, 15 Oct. 2007; 13 May 2013; *Ir. Times*, 12 May 2012; *Sunday Independent*, 13 May 2012; Elizabeth McCrum, *Fabric and form: Irish fashion since 1950* (1996), 20–21; Risteard Mulcahy, *Richard Mulcahy (1886–1971): a family memoir* (1999)