

# At home with Hilary Weston

The former model who invented the Primark label and went on to be Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, has worked alongside her billionaire husband, Galen, for five decades, she tells **Gemma Price**

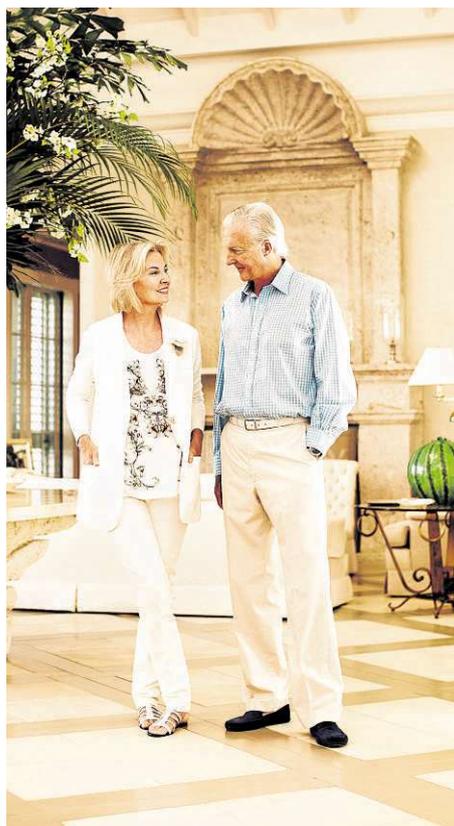
**H**ilary Weston is wintering in Windsor – a gated community for the very wealthy on Florida’s Atlantic coast, with a somewhat fitting name. In Canada, where the Westons sometimes live, the couple has been compared to royalty, and it was Hilary who chose the name for the Florida estate that now has some 325 luxury homes (she also has a say in who gets to buy or build there), but Windsor is just a small part of the Weston story. Together Galen and Hilary Weston head up a multi-billion dollar fashion and food empire that includes Brown Thomas as well as Penneys, Selfridges, and luxury goods stores and supermarkets across Canada. Add to that vast property interests and a generous philanthropic programme, and you have a life that does not allow for too much Florida downtime.

Hilary Weston is here, though, to launch a Jasper Johns exhibition at Windsor’s gallery and in between that and entertaining house guests, agrees to a rare interview.

Impeccably dressed in black and white striped pants and crisp white shirt, her up-turned collar brushed by avant garde gold leaf earrings, she greets me at the door. “Let’s go to my children’s sitting room,” she suggests, leading the way along a covered walkway, overlooking an enclosed courtyard garden dappled with winter sunshine. “Rather, my grandchildren’s room – my children are all grown up now. But they used to play in here and run straight out into the pool.”

Her accent is unmistakably English, and while celebrated as one of Canada’s most influential women for her high-profile public service, Weston’s roots are decidedly Irish.

She was born Hilary Frayne in Dún Laoghaire in 1942, the eldest of five. Her modelling career began in the 1950s and 1960s when designer Sybil Connolly – a



friend of the family – invited the young Hilary to tour the US with her to model her couture collection.

“I was a sort of muse. In a way, at that time, one was representing Irish fashion,” Weston recalls. “Chanel always used Irish tweed. Poplin, silk poplin, it was all made in Ireland. Sybil Connolly made these incredible dresses and ball gowns in fine, fine hand-pleated linen. Everyone in America loved those things.”

At home, the story goes that she was spotted by Galen Weston, a young man from a fabulously wealthy Canadian family who had come to Dublin at 21 to escape a domi-

neering father and to make his own way in the retail world. His father, Garfield Weston, had refused to bankroll his travels but then his Northern Irish grandmother, Eliza Whalley, had stepped in, offering him “a hundred grand” to go to Ireland and set up a business there.

In Dublin, he spotted the young Hilary on a billboard, sporting hot pants, and said to a friend that she was the kind of girl he would like to meet. The friend, auctioneer Corrie Buckley, arranged for them to meet at a dinner party.

“He had a terrible cold. I remember we managed to persuade him to have a hot toddy as it was the only thing that would cure him.” She smiles at the recollection. “Well, I think he had rather too many hot toddies! It cured him but it nearly killed him as well.”

By 1965, they were engaged; on July 23rd, 1966, they married in England.

If there were any assumptions that the young model would turn trophy wife, they were quickly dispelled. While Galen ploughed on with developing the Powers supermarket chain – which later evolved into Quinnsworth and which, incidentally, introduced the first avocados to Ireland, Hilary Weston moved from modelling into fashion retail and soon found herself in charge of what was to become an Irish institution or two. When Galen bought Todd Burns, a chain of Irish department stores that evolved into Primark, followed by luxury department store Brown Thomas, she put her modelling experience into revamping the fashion departments of both firms.

According to Galen Weston in an interview with *The Irish Times*, Hilary has always been key to his business interests from the very early days of their marriage. She was, he says, “the great seamstress, who could make all her own clothes, who ran the cut machine and trim business that



■ Hilary Weston, left, with her husband Galen, and above, at her home in Windsor, Florida

stocked the first Penneys store in Mary Street. That was Hilary’s operation, that private label. That is where Primark got its original name and the brand.” It’s said that he gave her Brown Thomas (he had paid just under £300,000 for the store) as a wedding present, just as his father had given his mother the Fortnum & Mason food store early in their marriage. “I did buy it [Brown Thomas] for her, but it was a place for her to work. She loved the merchandise and knew a lot about it.” he said.

“Working at Brown Thomas was such fun,” says his wife. “I had a great girlfriend from school, Cecily McMenamin, originally we both modelled together for Irene Gilbert. We would travel, go to Milan and Paris and see the collections and direct it from that point of view. She was a *bella figura* in terms of fashion, in Ireland and wherever she went.”

When Galen was called upon to return to Canada in 1974 to rescue failing food retailer Loblaw’s, Weston and their two infant



children, daughter Alannah and son Galen junior – Irish twins born in 1972 – moved too.

In the decade that followed, she kept fantastically busy. Building on her experiences in Ireland, Weston became vice-chairman of Holt Renfrew while still supervising Brown Thomas. Then, in 1979, at the behest of the Ireland Fund of America's founders Dan Rooney, former ambassador to Ireland, and Tony O'Reilly, Weston established the Ireland Fund of Canada.

"One felt one had a responsibility to do something. Ireland was going through very bad times – I hate to go back to them – but they were tough times, particularly as far as the terrorist groups were concerned," she says.

"The tradition in America had always been to send money back to Ireland to help their families, but the fear was that many conduits were illegal organisations and a vehicle for terrorist groups."

A few years later, the Westons experienced the worst fears of many families, first-hand. In 1983, the media reported that the Provisional IRA tried to murder the Westons and their two children at their

17th-century estate in Wicklow, and that five masked terrorists from the seven involved in a gunfight with police at the property had been shot. Although Weston won't speak about the incident, it was said that the family had already fled to England after the police learned of the plot from an informant. The Westons then gave up their residence in Ireland and remained in north America, shunning publicity for several years.

Weston settled in to life in Canada where in 1996, she was invited by Prime Minister Jean Chretien to run for the post of Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Queen's representative responsible for the Crown's constitutional roles in the province. At first she was unsure – she had her husband, children and growing business interests to think of – but her family's enthusiastic response to the news prompted her to accept the honour. In 1997, she was appointed the 26th Lieutenant Governor, the second woman to hold the position and the first from Ireland.

While Weston had been expecting some discussion of her new role, she wasn't prepared for the critics, who said she had got

the appointment solely for her social connections. But Weston soon proved her worth. After her first meeting with Queen Elizabeth II in London, she began a five-year whirlwind of formal and informal activities while championing social causes such as health care, aid for the poor, and education. She donated her \$92,000 salary to the Hilary M Weston Foundation for Youth, one of the many charitable foundations that bear her name.

During her term, Weston made 628 speeches – an average of one every three days – and hosted more than 600 receptions, including State visits by Nelson Mandela and the presidents of China, Greece, Portugal, Romania and the Philippines. "It wasn't until I took on the job as the Queen's representative that I realised the extent to which honour transcends one's work, one's family and one's duty," she says.

"I discovered it in people that you have never heard about and in places that you would never expect it to be. I discovered it wherever and whenever ordinary people have expressed a desire to give energetic, imaginative, joyful expression to their innate sense of compassion."

Weston has always maintained a busy schedule of philanthropic activities. She has worked with Angel's Quest in Ireland, an organisation that supports disabled children and their carers.

Along the way she helped transform the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto by raising more than \$250 million. She's involved with the Garfield-Weston Foundation and continues to serve as patron of social and community-based organisations.

The Westons are now based in London – but in winter they escape to Windsor where the community they developed has an 18-hole, par 72 links-style course designed by Robert Trent Jones, and a polo field.

In her first-floor drawing room she explains the life-size mural of her husband's champion polo pony Senisa, which she had

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My husband and I were building and growing things all the time, so obviously I was involved. It was interesting. We were a partnership in those businesses and we depended on each other for different skills

painted for him as a birthday surprise, then moves on to her favourite art pieces. "I'm very interested in ceramics. Ai Weiwei is the famous Chinese artist – he does monumental stuff but he also does ceramics – so it's fun to have those; I love collecting quixotic things," she says, gesturing to a huge green watermelon. She has also built up an important collection of Irish art, notably works by Yeats, Walter Osborne and William Leech.

These days, she has fewer opportunities to visit Ireland but when she does come, it is to visit old friends, and, of course, Brown Thomas, which is still a key part of Weston's portfolio. "It is part of Irish retail history," she says. "I believe the Irish know that and support it through thick and thin."

Her daughter Alannah continues as creative director of Selfridges while Galen junior, who married into the Bata shoe empire, is also involved in the family business.

After 50 years surrounded by the trappings of fine living, I wondered how Weston, the head of several luxury retail titans, defines luxury today.

"Luxury is such an overused word in so many ways, especially as far as fashion is concerned; luxury is different to everybody," she says. "But the greatest luxury? Time is the greatest luxury."