Willowbrook,

a flawed Eden

A memoir of growing up
in Millstreet, Co. Cork.

by

Jim O'Brien

Covers: Timothy Lane

Aubane Historical Society

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For my granddaughter, Olivia Marianna O'Brien,
my grandson Freddie Vincent Petersen,
my brothers Dick and Nick
and in memory of my Aunts
who did what they saw as their best
in difficult times.

‘ …childhood…the decisive period in every life ever lived,
its effects reverberating until the end…We remain the kids we
were…our ideas stay rooted in our autobiographies.’

Rick Salutin Walrus,
December 2007

Foreword

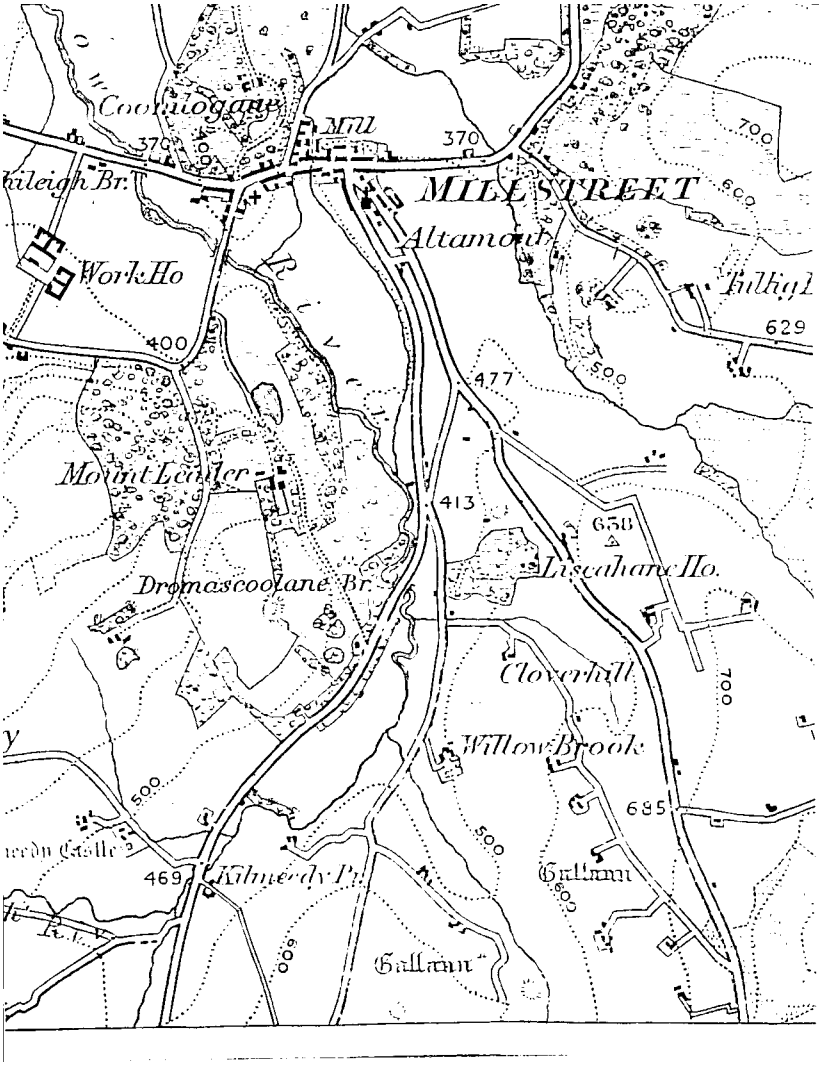
This memoir is unusual, and as far as I know unique, in giving us a very intimate account of life in the equivalent of a local 'Big House,' that of a Pomeroy house known as Willowbrook in Cloghboolabeg. The author lived there during the years of WWII as a child evacuee from London. He was an observant child with a very good memory. His descriptions of the people he got to know are true to life with all their virtues and vices honestly described thereby making them rounded, credible and unforgettable people.

Like all good stories it operates at many levels: the story of children separated from their parents and the effects this had on both; the issue of property relations within families and its consequences for individual members, particularly women; the relations between men and women, sexual and otherwise; the relations between adults and children; the relations between neighbours; relationships based on class distinctions and the consequences that can follow.

All the farm activities are well described with the attendant social activities that brought people together and showed the mutual interdependence that such a life entails despite all differences.

Some of the standards of the time in terms of hygiene, sanitation and behaviour are described in a way that today might make 'your hair stand on end' but at the same time there is no mention of any sickness or illness among the men and the maids and none of them ever needed to visit a doctor or a hospital. Today this may seem incongruous but maybe there is a connection between these two aspects of life in those days; it would make you wonder that maybe today we may be somewhat too over-sanitised for our own good.

Jack Lane
June 2013



Location of Willowbrook House: Ordnance Survey Map 48 (1841 and 1903),
2 kms. south of Millstreet on a minor road heading south
from the main road to Macroom

The author, aged 18, in the centre of the second row, as captain of the 1954 Beaumont College Boxing team, a minor English Public School, and ..…

...a few months later after a day's work with Dinny Buckley at Willowbrook

Prologue

Sometime in the early nineteen sixties, my newly wedded wife and I found ourselves at the tip of the Beara Peninsula (Co. Cork) looking across Dursey Sound at Dursey Island. By chance, our arrival coincided with that of a group of Dursey men who had rowed across the sound with a catch of lobsters and crayfish for a buyer. The meeting was obviously pre-arranged and apart from the Islanders and the buyer there were a dozen or so others there.

Even if in places only a few hundred metres wide, Dursey Sound is a treacherous, dangerous piece of water with fierce unpredictable tidal currents and strong gusty winds. The only people who crossed it regularly were I believe the Islanders and that only when necessary.

Their leader, we were firmly told, was known as the King of Dursey. A stocky, bright eyed man of about forty he was constantly on the move, alert and balanced on the balls of his feet like a boxer in the ring. Dressed in well worn working clothes with a cap (k'yop) at a rakish angle on the side of his head, he was a born talker and entertainer.

At one point someone asked him how they passed the long dark winter evenings. He replied: "*sitting around the fire telling ould stories and all sorts of lies*."

Via cable car, the journey across Dursey Sound it seems is easy now. Too easy maybe, for Wikipedia and other websites inform me the resident population has virtually disappeared, escaped perhaps. Now there are mostly only seasonal residents and presumably no longer a King with his "*ould stories and all sorts of lies"*.

Time passes, things change and even if we have no choice but to accept it that does not mean that nothing worthwhile has been lost.

I would like to thank critics Ben Gallagher and Chris King who both persuaded me to see the light and do some drastic, but very necessary, severe pruning of the original manuscript.

Most of all, I would like to thank Jack Lane of the Aubane Historical Society for all his help and support.

Jim O'Brien

1906, Famiy at Willowbrook. *Front*:- Left to right 'Aunt' Hanna Pomeroy (Nicholas the US civil war veteran's wife - they were childless), Nick (later my uncle), Nicholas (US Civil War vet), Mary (my mother), Richard Pomeroy (my grandfather with Scottie on his knee), Jerome (later my Uncle Jer), William (Uncle Bill the second youngest), Julia (my grandmother, née Hegarty) with Angela (Aunt Van) on her knee.
Back row:- Standing left to right Eileen (Aunt Eilish), Margaret (Aunt Margaret)
Missing from the photo:- (1) Bernard the eldest, b. 1888. He would have been 18 by then and may have been away at boarding school. (2) Thomas b. 1900, who died I gather when about 20 of tuberculosis. Was he already sick by then and unable to be included?

Introduction

On September 1st 1939 Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War (WWII) was on.

The British Government feared London and other British cities would be reduced to rubble and/or the populations decimated by poison gas, bombs or both. In anticipation of such a possible catastrophe the government ordered a diaspora of children from the cities. A substantial minority, something like 70,000, were sent to North America. Some Irish people with receptive relatives sent theirs to neutral Ireland. My brothers and I by then respectively five, three and one year old were among the latter. The majority were distributed to rural parts of England.

By the time WWII broke out my grandparents were dead and had left their houses and farms to three of their unmarried children. Willowbrook House, a mile or so outside the town of Millstreet in Co. Cork, was left to my mother's oldest unmarried sister, Margaret (Pomeroy). Aglish House Co. Waterford to my father's youngest and then unmarried brother, Matthew O'Brien. His older sister Kathleen, left an outlying farm some distance from the main farm, continued to keep house for her brother after their parents died.

One can safely assume these women received these properties as recompense for staying at home to look after their parents during their last years. Aunt Margaret ran her own show. Uncle Matthew ran his sister's, our Aunt Kathleen, for her.

In theory we might have been sent to either. In practice accompanied by our governess and teacher, Miss Kenny, we were sent to the care of Aunt Margaret in Willowbrook. Some months later we were joined by her youngest sister Angela (Aunt Van) then also unmarried. There we remained until November 1945.

Consequently our early childhoods were entirely Pomeroy dominated. In my view an unfortunate roll of the dice. When in my late teens I got to know my father's brother Matt O'Brien,

his wife Joan (by then he was no longer single), and his sister Kathleen better I found myself at ease with them in a way that was never the case with the Pomeroys.

That preference extended to their houses. As a child I was terrified of being alone in Willowbrook, even during daytime, an unease that extended into my teenage years. It was the opposite with the more decrepit, dark, as it might seem, spookier old O'Brien owned Aglish House.

Not that I was unattached to Willowbrook or that it left no impression. On the contrary as might be expected, those early years left vivid but by no means always happy memories.

The setting of Willowbrook House was/is a fine one, lacking only a body of water somewhere in the picture to be a truly striking setting. In the foreground the well-kept garden dominated on the left by a weeping ash and a cactus tree, on the right towards the avenue a patch of pampas grass that never seemed to change much. Nearer to the house, in different places, flower beds and shrubs. A fountain dominated the centre of the garden. Beyond, separated by the avenue, the front lawn sloped down towards the 'Clochar,' a flat, rock strewn, scraggy field of sorts, essentially a part of the flood plain of the unnamed stream that acted as a boundary between Aunt Margaret's land and her neighbours on that side of the farm.

On the other side of that stream the land sloped upward briefly to the south west before levelling out. In the near distance, hardly visible, the ruins of Kilmeedy Castle stood amongst hilly, irregular fields. Further on, a rolling patchwork of small fields stretched to the foot of the Derrynasaggart Mountains a few kilometres away, the peaks of Stoukeen and Caherbarnagh visible further west towards County Kerry.

Not that the aesthetic aspect meant anything to me then. It just happened to be, as far back as my memory goes the back drop to the stage on which we played out our small, childhood dramas; a stage without electricity, cars, tractors, phones, television, computers and all the other ever-changing technical wonders of to-day.

Roots

The end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century was a grim time for Ireland. The rebellion of 1798 had been put down with the death of something like 30,000 people and the Irish Parliament replaced with the amalgamation of that body with the Westminster Parliament to produce the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, an act of union that never sat well with the Catholic majority and a Protestant minority.

Two further violent rebellions followed in the nineteenth century attest to this - the Young Irelanders' Rebellion of 1848 and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) driven Fenian Rebellion of 1867 - both dismal failures. James F. X. ('Alphabet') O'Brien (1828 -1905), my grandfather's first cousin, took an active part in both. He escaped retribution for the first, not the second

In addition there were two failed political attempts to bring down the Union peacefully and constitutionally; Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Movement of the 1830s and 1840s and later that of the moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary (Home Rule) Party (IPP), first under Isaac Butt, later under Charles Stewart Parnell and after his fall by John Redmond. Despite these setbacks, not to mind the fearful famine of the late 1840s, socially and economically during the second half of the nineteenth Ireland had seen dramatic changes.

By the end of the century the fortunes of the once all powerful Anglo-Irish Ascendancy were in steep decline, with a concomitant rise in those of a relatively new prosperous middle class containing an increasing proportion of Catholics.

Three of my four great grandfathers could be numbered among these; my mother's maternal grandfather Jeremiah Hegarty; my father's maternal grandfather John Williams and paternal one James O'Brien.

With cash in the bank or at least good credit ratings, these men, no doubt supported by their wives, had their sons and sometimes their daughters educated beyond primary level. These in due time mostly mated with members of their own class sometimes to do so even crossing the all too well marked religious boundary between Catholic and Protestant.

Many of the members of the second and even third generations of such families tended to become not just accepting of Westminster-ruled Ireland they often became pillars of what turned out to be the last few and most benevolent decades of that rule or at most supporters of the IPP.

My father's father, James Vincent O'Brien (1851-1927) his wife and children were examples of just such a family.

His father, my great grandfather James, was a rough, hard drinking, sometimes violent man who evicted tenants, thought nothing of using his stick on his farm labourers and even threw his son and heir - the above James Vincent - down the stairs one night for not instantly obeying him. On another occasion it seems a half-pickled neighbour named Coffey, knocked on his front (hall) door. When my great grandfather answered, Coffey declared: *"Mr.O'Brien, I've come to remonstrate with you"* and the reply he got was: *"remonstrate be damned"* and knocking Coffey on his back with a punch, James slammed the door and left him there.

When he died in 1885 James Vincent, a quite different man compared to his irascible father, inherited Aglish House and the large farm that went with it. He married the daughter of a well-heeled Dungarvan Catholic solicitor and businessman. Subsequently he became a Justice of the Peace, Chairman of the Dungarvan (Co. Waterford) Board of Guardians, Chairman of the Board of the Waterford Lunatic Asylum and County Hospital. He certainly sought election, as a copy of one of his election posters seeking a seat on the Waterford County Council hangs on my wall. He was the first Catholic member of the Co. Waterford Grand Jury.

He clearly fitted comfortably into his time and place. Not unreasonably he no doubt hoped the relatively benign system in which he had grown up and played no mean a part would exist into the foreseeable future. Albeit in a form altered in some fairly harmless ways, by the creation of a Dublin-based constitutionally-created, Irish Parliamentary Government, one that could be expected to retain strong bonds with Britain and the British Empire, with all the social, economic, professional and other advantages such an association offered to his well-educated children. That being so it is likely he thought that, despite the huffing and puffing of the extreme nationalists, most Irish people would see it his way.

It must have been a fearful shock to him when the opposite happened and in the few brief years following the Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent guerilla campaign, the independent Irish Free State came into being in 1922 and he found his many contributions to the public life discredited, his family's name impugned and his children's expensive, largely Westminster rule orientated education more of a hindrance than a help to them in the New Ireland.

If the Willowbrook Pomeroys were as comfortably ensconced as the O'Briens in the structures of those last decades of British rule and as discomfited by the I916 Rising and what followed, the history of how the two families arrived there had differences largely due to the ethnic and religious division that lay (and still do in Northern Ireland) at the heart of so much Irish history; that between the native Irish Catholic majority and the settler Protestant minority.

In terms of the long period of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy rule, the Catholic O'Briens were relatively speaking nouveau riche, uppity 'natives.' Not that this seemed to bother or encourage them to claim a connection with that fading Ascendancy. They were who they were and proud of that - not without reason. Not only had their father been a widely respected public man in Co. Waterford, one of his first cousins, James F. X. O'Brien,[1] had

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[1] J.F.X. ('Alphabet') O'Brien had other arrows in his historical quiver.

Following the '48 rebellion he fled to Wales until the brouhaha quietened down and then to New Orleans. When the American CivilWar broke out, like Nicholas Pomeroy, he enlisted in the CSA (Confederate States Army) as an assistant surgeon - he'd had medical training at University College Galway and at the Sorbonne in Paris though he didn't graduate from either. New Orleans fell to the Northern Federal Forces very early in that war and J.F.X. essentially became a prisoner of war. Claiming British citizenship (no doubt a painful dose for a staunch Irish Nationalist like him to have to swallow) he managed to extricate himself and returned to Ireland to rejoin his fellow Irish Republican Brothers in the 1867 Rebellion.

That is to say in one setting - the US South - he joined an armed group bent on continuing the massive, almost total, repression of one population while in another he joined a different armed group bent on doing the opposite, fighting for the freedom of a different population. He was a man not without contradictions.

He is also mentioned by name in James Joyce's 'Ulysses' thereby acquiring a small degree of something near literary immortality.

His greatest claim to historical singularity however lies in the fact that for his part in the Fenian Rebellion of 1867, he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death by being hanged drawn and quartered; the last person in the British Empire to receive this gruesome sentence. His autobiography was been republished in 2010 by UCD Press: *"For the Liberty of Ireland, at Home and Abroad - the Autobiography of J. F. X. O'Brien"* (ISBN-13: 9781904558996, ISBN-10:1904558992).

been a figure of some importance, even notoriety, in the history of British and Ireland. Another, James Vincent Cleary (1828 - 1898),[2] the first Catholic Archbishop of Kingston Ontario, was a significant figure in rapidly developing Canada.

Though the Willowbrook Pomeroys of my mother's generation had at least one exceptional achievement to their credit in that of the four Pomeroy sisters, two were doctors, one a dentist and one an independent farmer; it was not this but the fact that they could claim not to be nouveau rich (like the O'Briens) and of Norman Protestant descent with the implication of a historic connection to the Ascendancy, that was front and central to their view of themselves.

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[2] There was apparently another side to the late Archbishop as I discovered later.

In 2004 accompanied by a few friends I went to Kingston Ontario, his former diocese, to view St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral (and St. James, the side chapel) the still extant monuments to his drive, energy and ambition.

When there I knocked on the Presbytery door and mentioned my relationship to His Grace. We were immediately invited in. Among other things a priest showed us a portrait of him (I have another) hanging on the presbytery's wall. The priest then insisted we join him to view some crypts in the basement of the Cathedral.

There is a dozen or so of these attached side by side. On the front of each is the name of a late nun or priest with dates of birth death etc. At one end of the row, if my memory serves me right, is a larger one, on which is written:-

> 'Have mercy O Lord on the Soul of Elizabeth Minnitt faithful housekeeper of Right Revd. Bishop Cleary obit. Dec. 24 1881.'

He died in 1898 seventeen years later.

As we went back up stairs from the crypt, the priest turned and asked me: "*Do you know where he's buried*?" Puzzled I asked him why he thought I might know. He replied: "*You're family. We thought you might*."

It transpired, quite unlike the Catholic tradition of priestly builders of such Cathedrals, there is no monument of any sort in or around St. Mary's to mark Archbishops Cleary's grave. In fact no-one seems to know where he is buried; certainly at least odd.

Then again maybe not so odd for the priest implied a suspicion lingered that His Grace had perhaps honoured his required celibacy obligation 'more in the breach than in the observance' and the Archbishop had had his remains interred in the crypt with those of his afore mentioned 'faithful housekeeper'. If this was so little wonder his burial place was kept a secret given the scandal that would inevitably have followed if his secret was revealed.

As an Archbishop His Grace must have been in line for a cardinal's hat. Did he die too soon or did rumours of his suspected relationship with Miss Minnitt leak out and scupper his chances? If so, what a pity. An Archbishop perched on a branch of the family tree is not bad; a Cardinal something else entirely.

One side effect of this was that, following the birth of the new Irish State in 1921 and with it, the virtual disappearance of the remnants of that Ascendancy in many parts of Ireland including the Millstreet area, the Catholic Willowbrook Pomeroys' sense of social superiority could hardly help but be enhanced.

They assumed their name, relatively large houses, land, education and an aura of having a connection to that now departed but not entirely forgotten group, made them the new social elite, a perception seemingly not disputed that I remember, by the majority of those around them. Apart from one notable exception, they were always addressed as Miss Pomeroy (Pumerai) or Aunt Van as Mrs. Cronin (when she later married) while they always addressed others by their Christian names.

It was said of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy that they were great snobs and if snobbery of any kind is hardly an admirable trait, it could be argued better a great than a petty snob, at least the former has a certain ignoble dignity; the latter none. Sadly it was the petty version that flourished in the newly independent but still socially stratified Ireland of the nineteen thirties and forties.

All sorts of minor differences, in table manners, modes of horse drawn transport (there was an almost unbridgeable social chasm between those who travelled by pony-and-trap and those who did so by pony-and-side or back to back, 'car'); men's head gear; the way people spoke; handled a walking stick; appearance; apparel. Even natural physical features such as bat ears etc., acquired a ridiculous importance as indicators of social and therefore immutable ethnic difference that neither virtue nor accomplishment could eradicate or be forgotten. Even certain farm animals had definite social class status; goats and donkeys were beasts of poorer farmers and others and sheep were perhaps a bit iffy. It was socially de rigueur, not to 'major' in sheep.

In terms of speech there were some striking differences between the classes. One of the most striking related to the

pronunciation of 'ea.' Among most local people it rhymed with way, say, clay such that tea became tay, beat became bait, wheat became whait and so on; a pronunciation that apparently derived from the great eighteenth century 'Big Houses'. Upstairs their ladyships drank *tay* not 'tee' and, probably less used to hot drinks than we are to-day, poured their 'tay' into the saucer and drank it cooled from there.

If these same gentry had been greatly reduced in number and power by the nineteen forties - and they had - the descendants of their mostly initially Irish speaking servants and employees had not and having learnt English from them passed on their pronunciation to those descendants plus the habit of 'saucering their tay.' Tea to rhyme with pee and drinking it from the cup not the saucer seems to be of Victorian era origin.

By the nineteen forties and maybe considerably earlier pronouncing 'tea' as we all do now and saucering it had turned full circle to become a snotty-nosed short-hand, delineating behaviour that separated beyond redemption, those considered 'common' from those who were not. What would their ladyships have said?

Willowbrook House being built on sloping ground, the rear wall of the house downstairs was below ground level. A consequence of this was that the upstairs/downstairs social divide was also literal, enhanced by having separate entrances at the different levels. The kitchen (downstairs) was the only room used in common to any extent and that not much.

Upstairs lived our aunts, governess and teacher, Miss Kenny, and us with bedrooms, bathroom, toilet, sitting/dining room, lobby, hall and hall door with an overall degree of comfort, order and cleanliness that would still be acceptable in an old fashioned middle class home almost anywhere even to-day.

Downstairs lived the two working men and the maid. The latter, whose only routine yard work was to help with the milking, was able to keep herself and her Spartan though not uncomfortable room clean and warm. In fact she had the warmest room in the house as the slow burning anthracite 'Aga'

cooker in the kitchen which rarely if ever went out, was on the other side of one wall of her bedroom. Pleasant though this may have been she was provided with neither toilet nor washing facilities other than the kitchen sink, the scullery tap and scullery grating and of course with only cold water.

The two men also were without such basic facilities though in contrast to the maid in the room beside them, they shared a none too clean double bed in a cold, dark, bare, damp room with a rough wardrobe in one corner and only a piece of worn linoleum on the concrete floor beside the bed; the whole pervaded by the overwhelming stench of rotting socks.

Not that these conditions were all that bad by the standards of the time; they were not. Most if not all of the maids and farm workers were the offspring of labourers or small farmers, usually members of large families reared in conditions that were by modern criteria more than rough; their parents couldn't afford anything else. That being the case their living conditions at Willowbrook probably didn't differ much from those with which they had grown up and more than likely, they ate better than they had ever done. In addition their boss was a polite, kind, non-interfering woman, not some hard driving, tough, crusty man bent on getting as much work out of his labourers for as little as possible in the way of food or pay. Willowbrook compared to most, must have been a good billet.

With this upstairs/downstairs physical separation came astonishingly little social contact between these two tiny separate adult 'populations,' one upstairs, the other downstairs.

We were the exceptions, allowed to breach this social barrier with virtual impunity; however to survive reasonably unscathed in these divergent settings we had to learn to adapt to the quite different social, verbal and behavioural codes that held sway in each setting.

The Willowbrook Pomeroys

All family histories begin with begetting and it hardly needs saying the begetting business goes back a long way. However, in the game of genealogical one-upmanship what counts is not our common, mostly unrecorded ancestry but a paper trail, the longer the better that leads to a specific ancestor or ancestors preferably of some historic importance.

Despite their conviction they were descended from a Norman Knight named Pomerai - not quite Pomeroy but near enough - who arrived in England in 1066 with William the Conqueror, my mother, who revered this connection, could not find a paper trial that extended beyond the recorded birth of one Richard Pomeroy, born in 1615. That of course does mean there is no such trail.

This Richard, begat a second Richard born in 1660 who begat a third Richard in 1708. He in turn begat Richard Henry in 1745 - the year of the Battle of Culloden. Richard Henry acquired Clara House and lands, a couple of kilometres from the town of Millstreet in 1787. Richard Henry married a Catholic, Mary Dunne.[3] Their children were baptised as Catholics. Thus the origin of the Catholic Millstreet branch of this Protestant family. Richard Henry begat Thomas who begat Richard Thomas my grandfather, born in 1857. He died in 1935. His wife Julia (née Hegarty) born I'm not sure when, died in 1937. Both spent their lives in the Millstreet area.

The thirty five sections of the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 were aimed at preventing further 'hibernisation' of the Norman Irish overlords of Ireland. In these Statutes those of native descent were described as 'mere' Irish. For those of Norman descent the 'mere' disappeared. That is, long before the Reformation made religion the defining barrier between invaders and

[1] "Mary Dunne got permission from the Church to eat cabbage that was boiled with bacon on Friday, not the bacon itself." Mother's letter to me undated.

natives there was a clear legalistic attempt to keep the invaders and the invaded as separate societal entities.

Under the seventeenth and eighteenth century Cromwellian Penal (anti-Catholic) Laws in Ireland, as Protestant settlers the Pomeroys would have belonged to a strongly favoured and consequently wealthier minority with the prestige and social position that derived from these advantages.

Subsequently, though the Clara branch turned Catholic, that aura of former social pre-eminence would have remained with them Not only in their own eyes but in the eyes of many of their mostly Catholic confreres some of whom, by the middle nineteenth century with the Penal Laws if not totally removed, greatly diluted, became wealthy and successful.

Among the latter was my great grandfather Jeremiah Hegarty, a man of apparently obscure origin, who in the latter half of the nineteenth century became a wealthy if not the most wealthy man in the town of Millstreet. He was said to have ridden into Millstreet (probably around 1830 or 1840) from where is unclear, tied his horse to the hitching rail outside the post office and, having given a tip of half a crown (two shillings and sixpence) to a street urchin to look after this animal, went inside. This was an enormous tip for so minor a service - half a crown still bought two pints of Guinness in Dublin in 1954, a century or more later; in 1850 maybe two barrels or more not to mind two pints.

News that a wealthy young man had arrived in town spread like the Spanish flu after WW1. In no time apparently he had parlayed this into wedding and bedding (or was it the other way around?) the only daughter of the town's then wealthiest merchant. Subsequently, so the story went, he admitted at the time of his arrival, except for his horse and saddle and that half-crown he possessed little other worldly goods. What he lacked in such goods it seems he made up with charm and chutzpah. I won't vouch for the truth of this story but if he had arrived not nearly as poor as he later claimed to be, he certainly didn't finish up that way.

Being the sort of man he was it can hardly have pleased him when his (I think only) daughter Julia fell in love with Richard Pomeroy the impecunious son of a local shopkeeper. However as a Pomeroy with gentry connections her parvenu father of 'mere' Irish origin, might well have seen his daughter's marriage into such a family as a step up in the world. It may also have been that his strong-willed daughter said she would marry him whether or not her father approved and her father, and presumably mother, practical people, accepted the situation.

Willowbrook House and the roughly 57 acres that went with it was, I suspect, a wedding present from her father for Julia and her new husband.

By all accounts our grandfather was a pleasant, easy going, impractical man more interested in gossip, stories and painting than work. He seems to have brought little to his bride other than his name, a pleasant disposition and, if the number of her pregnancies is anything to go by, plenty of action between the sheets. Other than in this capacity, he was it seems, more decorative than functional.

His impracticability seems to have come to him honestly. According to my mother his grandfather Richard Henry Pomeroy of Clara is reputed to have been an thoroughly impractical, improvident man who, despite having a mostly stony farm at the foot of Clara Mountain, a house and not much else, kept a pack of hounds and his own musical retainer in the person of 'Gansy the Piper.' [4]

His grandson, it seems, was equally impractical. Besides Willowbrook our grandparents also owned (possibly rented) land some distance from Willowbrook on which they grazed cattle. From time to time his practical wife would send her impractical husband to look these cattle over and count them.

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[4] Gansy, a woollen sweater. Why the piper was given the nickname 'Gansy' is not recorded. From the same letter:- "(Gansy)…whose son went to work for Lord Kenmare in Killarney and was convicted of stealing a bottle of wine from Lord Kenmare and sentenced to transportation for life to Australia but was allowed to visit his father at Clara on the way to the transport ship and actually did very well in Australia." Ibid.

En route it seems almost invariably he came across one or other of his cronies and invited him or them to join him in his pony and trap. Long discussions followed more interesting and absorbing than counting cattle and when he got home, the counting forgotten, he would have to invent a plausible number to try to satisfy his wife.

On these and similar journeys the pony left to its own devices, headed for the side of the road to graze on the verge or the stone fence (ditch), in the process pulling the trap and passengers slowly along over whatever stones or other objects were hidden in the grass verge at the side of the road. On one occasion a particularly large stone nearly tipped the trap over. His frightened passenger of the moment is reported to have turned to him and said sardonically: *"Dick you nearly missed that one*."

At some point he became clerk of the local court and apparently used the walls of the courthouse as a canvas for his portraits of local characters. He painted landscapes in water colour a few of which hung in the house. I have no idea what happened to them.

When grandfather was on his deathbed one of his children tried to reassure him he was not as sick as he thought. He coolly replied: *"Oh no; I'm dying. I've had a good innings. I can't complain*" and die he soon did.

Besides presenting his daughter and her new 'toy-boy' husband with the Willowbrook property, our great grandfather must have come to his daughter and her husband's financial aid in other ways. Even if their total income from the farm and his job as town clerk was enough to feed and clothe their large brood, it seems highly unlikely they could have afforded their nine children's private boarding school, not to mind the university education of four of them.

In truth, grandfather's greatest life achievement seems to have been to marry a rich man's favourite daughter. A lot of marginally competent men have achieved less.

The marriage in total produced twelve children, seven before 1900 one during (our mother) and four after. The eldest daughter

died in infancy as did a brother Robert. Subsequently the former's three Christian names were distributed among three of their four other daughters. All survived into old age. Of the six boys who survived infancy Tom died of tuberculosis aged about twenty. The eldest son Bernard the father of three daughters, died in 1938 aged fifty the same year as his mother

The other three boys survived into old age. Two of them, Nicholas and Jerome, lived all their adult lives in the vicinity of Millstreet. Nicholas (Uncle Nick) inherited Clara House from a childless relative also Nicholas Pomeroy a veteran of the Army of the South (CSA) in the American civil war. Nicholas left an account of his experiences during the first year or so of that murderous four year conflict.

Sometime after that war ended the latter inherited Clara and returned, apparently reluctantly, to Ireland for good. Married but childless he left Clara to the above, the next available Nicholas Pomeroy, our Uncle Nick.

Born in 1890 Jerome ('Jerum') the second oldest of the family to survive infancy, unlike his older brother Bernard could apparently do no wrong in his parents' eyes. Around 1920 when the last of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Leader family died their fine Georgian House and farm - the back gate of which was less than a kilometre from Millstreet - came up for sale. By then the local veterinarian, Uncle Jer, bought both house and land for I believe £600 (pounds), a bargain even at that time. His wife Mildred O'Neill (Aunt Mildy) claimed to be a relative of the US playwright Eugene O'Neill. They were childless.

As was common practice in those days, at least one daughter stayed at home to look after her parents. The sacrificial one in this instance was Aunt Margaret the oldest, plainest and perhaps the least able to defy her strong willed mother. Her parents were the first of many family members unmarried, childless Aunt Margaret took care of during her long life, among them the three of us.

Unusual for the time, no son remained at home to run and duly inherit the farm; in this instance not that surprising. By the

time their parents died the boys were well educated, married and, by the standards of those difficult economic and uncertain political times in Ireland, were relatively well set up and unmarried Margaret had to be provided with a source of income when their parents died.

It seems both grandparents wanted Willowbrook to remain in the Pomeroy name. Though a remark grandfather made to my mother towards the end of his life that: "*I would give the whole of Willowbrook for a stone of Clara*" adding hastily: *"Don't tell your mother I said that*" it seems likely grandma more than he, was the driving force behind this plan.

This presented them with two difficulties. On the one hand, if Aunt Margaret was left the place unencumbered and remained single, she might choose not to leave it to any of her Pomeroy nephews. On the other hand if she married and had children, it was beyond highly unlikely her husband's name would be Pomeroy and neither would their children's, one or more of whom was likely to inherit and if so it would not be a Pomeroy.

Their solution was to leave Willowbrook to their dutiful, good natured daughter for life and entail it to the first born male Pomeroy of the next generation. The bequest had to be made in this form for, by the date of their deaths, of their nine grand children none of us fitted the bill.

It was not a just or wise solution. In the short term it embittered Aunt Margaret giving her the choice of Willowbrook or the chance of a husband and family of her own - one or the other not both. In the event she chose the former and died sans husband or children.

In the long term it led to the ruination of the house for due to that entailment provision, Willowbrook passed to Richard the oldest male Pomeroy of the next generation. Born about a year after his grandmother's death, he was the oldest son of our Uncle Bill, the youngest of the family. Richard became a doctor and spent most of his working life in Birmingham (England). Later in life he was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) I believe, for services to medicine in that area.

With little or no attachment to the place he got around the entailment provisions and promptly sold it. The new owner's main interest was the land not the house or outbuildings. His elderly parents did live there for a while but didn't stay long. No one has lived there since and that was decades ago.

There is then more than a little irony in the fallout from our grandparents' plan to keep Willowbrook in the Pomeroy name. Not only did it quite unjustly, distort the life of their care giving daughter, no Pomeroy or anybody else, lives there now. The last time I saw it and that was several years ago, it looked almost beyond repair.

Last Afternoon Tea

Tea was always at four-thirty
With brown bread, butter and jam
The maid brought the tray
Upstairs from the kitchen.
She left long ago
Tea was still upstairs at four-thirty

But time does what it does
The stairs plus tray too much now
Tea is downstairs
At the large rough table where
Labour hardened men
Once sucked tea from saucers noisily.
The two aged women look
Defeated, out to place
Though silver-plated tea-pot and cozy are unchanged
And tea still at four-thirty.

Jeremiah Hegarty

Upstairs

From 1939 to 1946 the two central, most immediate figures in our lives, were Aunt Margaret and Aunt Van with a live-in acolyte in the form of Miss Kenny our governess and teacher. Beyond this trio were uncles Nick and Jerome who lived locally and beyond them again Uncle Bill and Aunt Eilish who did not. Entirely cut off from the family we didn't even know of Uncle Bernard's existence

They were a reticent lot, that generation of Pomeroys; my mother a little less so and she later did mention a few incidents. An almost-confrontation between British and Irish armed groups inside Willowbrook House during the first 'Troubles' and, as a child she was a favourite of Nick Pomeroy, the American Civil War veteran and a few other bits and pieces.

The others rarely if ever mentioned anything from their childhood or youth even though the latter were spent during the troubled violent and surely memorable times that existed in Ireland from 1916 to 1926. It is quite possible there were divisive intra-family subjects such as the expulsion of their never mentioned oldest brother Bernard from the family circle but also to political differences that arose during the times through which they had lived.

There had to be some tension between Aunt Margaret and Aunt Van though I never saw or heard them openly disagree about anything. Even though ten or twelve years younger than her sister, Aunt Van seemed the dominant one. Whether this was by virtue of her personality or a stated or unstated claim to act directly 'in loco parentis' for our parents I don't know. Whatever the case, it must have been galling for Aunt Margaret to have to play second fiddle to her youngest sister in her own house and that is what largely happened, certainly in regard to us.

If I didn't and still don't know that much about the under-

currents of their relationship with each other I have even less idea of their relationships with most of the rest of their siblings or that between those others.

Most but not all. I do know that despite age differences my mother and Aunt Van had always been close. I have a lingering impression her three sisters were proud of but a little scandalised by Eileen (Aunt Eilish) who painted her toe nails red, was proud of and not adverse to showing off her fine ankles and was I think suspected of living in a ménage a trois with her employer, another Irish general practitioner in Derbyshire.

With the exception perhaps of Aunt Margaret, my mother and her sisters were the opposite of warm hearted, maternal women. Even if in Aunt Margaret's case the maternal urge was deeper I have no memory of her ever giving any of us a hug and certainly none of her sisters did anything so possibly detrimental to the development of our moral fibre.

On the other hand maybe we were just not appealing children and we could behave badly. At some point two mongrel terrier pups arrived in Willowbrook, one with black, one with brown ears. They became 'Blackie' and 'Brownie.' For some reason in our eyes, as they grew 'Brownie' could do no wrong and poor 'Blackie' no right. The latter we treated so badly it was removed and given to a neighbour and this at a time when cruelty to animals didn't count for much.

This is not to imply we were mistreated in any way. Corporal punishment even in the mildest form was non-existent (later at boarding schools we received our ration thereof) nor did they treat us unfairly, or scream or shout or belittle us in any way. Occasionally we were told off, usually by Aunt Van, but not without justification. We – especially me – could be bad little blanks. We were kept at a distance, treated more like children at a well run boarding school, fairly but with little warmth, love or affection.

Whether their coldness can be ascribed to their personalities, circumstances or otherwise keeping their emotional distance was a sensible even if an unstated, largely unconscious, personal

strategy. We were not their children and, unless our parents were killed in the London 'blitz' we would be repossessed after the war. The fonder they got of us the more heartbreaking that repossession.

There were further considerations that almost certainly had adverse effects on their relationship with us. This was an age when, and a society where, other than the nunnery or a decorously virginal, often lonely poor spinsterhood, marriage and a family were the overwhelmingly respectable normality for women and respectable normality ruled their lives. For the unmarried any sexual activity was considered morally heinous and a pregnancy outside of marriage a social disaster.

Nevertheless, like other women, they presumably carried the burden or the gift of sexual desire and drives with their powerful, ancient, pleasurable imperatives. In the strictly monogamous, contraceptive free, deeply puritanical, Catholic Ireland of the time, the only acceptable 'safe' way for a woman to assuage these desires was within marriage and at that time both were unmarried. Our presence was hardly a come-on to potential suitors.

Furthermore, neither was in the first bloom of youth, already outsiders in the marital stakes. In particular this was true of Aunt Margaret who in 1939 at forty five, short, a bit stout and 'homely' was an outsider indeed though relatively well off which might tempt some suitor. She may still have had hopes.

Aunt Van, ten years younger, and the best looking of the four sisters, was less likely to be left an also ran in the marital stakes. Nevertheless, in 1939 she was already thirty three unmarried and, following the devastating slaughter of men of her vintage in WW1, prospective husbands were more scarce than would have been the case at other times. Post WWII Aunt Van did marry an old suitor, John Cronin of Ploverfield near Millstreet. He must have been at least ten years older and she by then most likely menopausal with all that that implies. I would be surprised if their sex life was anything but the opposite of torrid but you never know.

Unquestionably we were instrumental in costing her not just some of the best years of her life but at least the long postponement of one of life's central experiences and greatest pleasures not to mind removing the likelihood of her having children of her own. She would have been stupid not to have been aware of this and a saint not to have resented it. She was neither. This was not all.

Aunt Margaret had already reared Des (Desmond), the son of her sister Dr. Eileen (Eilish) Kelly, after the latter's husband, also a doctor, died. The latter, a severe alcoholic veteran of WW1 did not survive longer than the late twenties. Years later my mother in an uncharacteristically forthright moment, told me when he died the only things he left her sister were two children and venereal disease (STD) from which I presume she fully recovered.

Des was roughly a decade my senior. It was not that Aunt Margaret did not become fond of us, I am sure she did, but we were always nephews and no more than nephews, whereas she loved Des like a son. She described more than once how she and Julia Connors the maid of the time cried their eyes out the morning of his first day at the Millstreet primary school.

If my brothers were easy enough to look after and I think they were, I was at least less so and at times must have been a downright nuisance. Among other things, I was seriously afraid of the dark and had great difficulty getting to sleep without a light in the room and without electricity, a wartime scarcity of candles, stove oil and gas that presented difficulties solvable only by having an adult nearby. Aunt Margaret fixed this by allowing me to share her bed for a while though for how long I am not sure. I also had what I am sure now were episodes of derealisation and depersonalisation. These are mental states in which a person feels as if his or her surroundings are unreal or themselves unreal. Such states are not that uncommon in normal children or in adults in highly stressful circumstances or in a number of psychiatric conditions. Sometimes they last indefinitely.

For long periods Aunt Margaret used to sit silently on a chair in the window of the dining room turned sideways, her right elbow resting on the back of the chair, her right hand on the back of her head slowly rubbing her scalp with her right forefinger the result, a small bald spot on the crown of her head, of which I think she was entirely unaware.

There was another angle to Aunt Van's story. Pre-WWII, she was a dentist and my then unmarried mother a doctor five years her senior, lived in and worked out of our (future) North London home. A former doctor's house it had a built-in consulting room (surgery)/waiting room set up, no doubt the main reason they bought it.

At some stage my father arrived on the scene and there was it seems more than a little rivalry between them. Despite this, after my parent's marriage in 1932, Aunt Van continued to live with them; a ménage a trois though almost certainly an uninteresting, chaste one.

It is hard to believe this was not a somewhat fraught situation not easily resolved for, as mentioned above, Aunt Van was probably not only part owner of the house but like her sister ran her practice from it. My parents may have had no choice but to let her stay until she chose to leave. Then again maybe they all got along fine together; my father was an easygoing if weak man. For whatever reason or reasons Aunt Van remained in Amhurst Park until she joined Aunt Margaret, Miss Kenny and us in Ireland in late 1939 or early 1940.

In consequence she was the nearest to being a constant figure in our lives from birth until her post-war return to Ireland from London in late 1945 after WWII had ended. Despite this, by then almost lifelong association, I have no memory of being upset when she left permanently for Ireland some weeks after she had delivered us to our parents and we were parted for the first time. I can't recall her shedding too many tears either.

When Aunt Van died my brothers forgot to tell me until weeks later. I was not greatly put out. When our parents died they did the same thing and sad to say I wasn't greatly put out

then either. I was however upset when on Aunt Margaret's death it happened yet again. I was fonder of her than of any of her sisters or brothers and remember, as a nine year old, weeping profusely in Cork when, in November 1945 we left her behind on the dock as we boarded the Innisfallen for Fishguard Harbour in southwest Wales and then continued on by train to London.

Much later when older and much, much wiser I noted a quirky resemblance in physical appearance and character between my two Aunts and two then prominent contemporary members of the British Royal Household; Aunt Margaret to the late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (they even chose similar hats) and Aunt Van to Mrs. Simpson, Edward VIII's hard Yankee bit of stuff, and later his wife the Duchess of Windsor.

If they had met at an agricultural fair or some such gathering, which they both would have enjoyed, I believe Aunt Margaret and the late Queen Mum would have got along famously not to mind admiring each other's hats. Whether Mrs. Simpson and Aunt Van would have liked or detested each other is another matter though it would probably have been one or the other.

Aunt Van I suspect, more a dentist by default than anything else, would I expect have quit her profession the day she married a man with deep enough pockets to support her. I don't think she ever got used to the bad breath, dirty teeth and foetid mouths filled with rotting fangs that was her daily experience. I can't say I blame her. Since most dentistry in those days consisted of pulling teeth, according to my father, she had a forearm like a blacksmith.

More peripheral but still significant figures in those early years were our uncles Nick and Jerome. Men of local substance both farmed even if farming was a secondary occupation for Uncle Jerome a vetinarian. Both I believe, kept an eye out for their farming sister and made sure neither her male neighbours nor her farm workers took advantage of her.

Educated at a boarding school (Mungret) and owner of Clara House the Pomeroy family 'seat' for the best part of two centuries, Uncle Nick clearly saw himself as a country

gentleman. He always wore a suit and considered it beneath him to do farm work other than occasionally as the notion took him. He had it seemed some of his father's traits.

He came by Clara as far as I know because he happened to have been christened Nicholas and his older childless cousin, the American Civil War veteran, also Nicholas Pomeroy, left it to him. It is more than possible a fair chunk of change came with the property for he had Clara House completely rebuilt in the 1930s. In addition it is hard to see how he could have enjoyed such a leisurely life on his farm income alone not least because much of Clara land was poor.

He did not though, bring up his two children 'oven-ready' to live a similar easy- going existence; not even Dick his son and heir. That I remember, from an early age both had to milk cows (by hand of course) before they walked the mile and a half to school each day and do the same when they returned home. Dick like his father also went to Mungret though his stay it seems was very brief. I don't think his older sister Judy, was ever given such an opportunity

It wasn't that we were unwelcome at our Uncles' houses but we were not that welcome either. At least this was the case when we were children. Maybe at some level our uncles had concluded if they ignored us it might serve as grounds for opting out if some crisis arose concerning us such as our parents' deaths or a maybe even a German invasion. If push came to shove, in such circumstances they could say: "*nothing to do with me; I hardly know them*" which was true enough.

This neglect lessened to some degree as we grew up or it did for me. On a number of occasions I happened to be in Willowbrook during the shooting season. Uncle Nick occasionally invited me to join him, his cronies and his succession of pointers – always called Helga – he even forgave me when I illegally shot a hen instead of cock pheasant though he wasn't pleased. Despite this gaffe subsequently he diligently looked after a couple of cock pheasants specifically for me in a small copse in the middle of a field below Clara House. His

excellent pointer one of the Helgas duly did her job. When the pheasant did get up to my embarrassment I missed. It was not my last miss.

A common characteristic of Uncle Nick's shooting cronies was the lack of care they took of their twelve gauge side by side, double-barreled shotguns. I am not sure how much care Uncle Nick's got either but it could hardly have been less than theirs.

The only one of these cronies I can recall by name, was presumably christened Cornelius Heally. This had long since been abbreviated to Neally Healy, phonetically 'Nailey Hailey.' As befitted their general style Nealy's rusty old gun was held together mostly by wire, binder twine and hope, mostly hope. On one occasion he let me try it out. The breech mechanism was so worn and loose when I pulled the trigger a disconcerting blast of grit and smoke blew back into my face.

Small, shabby, complaintive and oppositional with a mournful nasal voice, Nailey wanted to go left if the rest wanted to go right, up if they wanted to go down, stop if they wanted to go on. He lived in a tiny row house, the last on the Millstreet street that beyond his domain became the open 'tar' road to Macroom and further afield. Adverse to regular work, he seemed to have tried a shifting series of ways to make a living; none with great success.

At one point he had a taxi. He can't have been a great driver since to Aunt Margaret's half humourous annoyance, he described her elegant, daffodil lined, meandering easy to negotiate avenue as: "*the trickiest boreen I ever druv up*." Having the way up to your house described as a boreen had derogatory undertones. It insinuated the householder was too poor to have anything better and poverty was as it still is the ultimate social sin.

At another juncture, given he and his fellow Catholics (99 plus percent of the population) could not eat meat on Friday he concluded money could be made out of fish as there was no fishmonger in Millstreet. Lacking a fridge his fish rapidly began

to stink. Seeking a way to prolong their shelf life he considered putting them in an empty meal bag in the Finnow River that bordered the field below his house posing a question about the advisability of this by asking one of our Aunts: "*If I true 'em down in de ruvver would dey* (the wild fish) *ate 'em*?"

The answer is unclear. However since he soon gave up on the fishmongering for some other probably equally fruitless venture, the likelihood is: "*Dey* (did) *ate 'em*."

Another of Uncle Nick's sporting group was a 'mountainy' farmer with a well earned reputation for producing poteen (home distilled whiskey). Once on an August 12th, opening day of the grouse season, Uncle Nick brought along his wife's cousin who was staying with them at the time. A Cork city man, he was soft, unfit and overweight, largely ignorant of country ways and at times in dangerous humour. After a warm morning tramping the lower slopes of Mushera Mountain, he was hot, tired and thirsty. When we went back to the cars for lunch he asked if anyone could spare him a drink of water.

The poteen distiller produced a bottle filled with a clear fluid and handed it to him without a word. The poor naïve city slicker assumed it was what it looked like – water – and being thirsty took a good swig. To gales of laughter he was soon dancing around, blue in the face and gasping for air. Just to see what it was like I touched the opening of the bottle with a finger and put it to my lips. Even this meagre taste set my mouth on fire. When he got back to Clara that evening city the slicker is reported to have said plaintively to his wife: "*they damn near killed* me" and quite possibly they damn near did.

The last time I was in Millstreet Nealy Healy's shabby little house was gone. Where it had stood was an entrance to one of Noel C. Duggan's industrial yards. It seemed all traces of Nealy had been razed from the face of the earth.

Despite our more frequent visits to Mount Leader – it was much nearer than Clara – our relationship with Uncle Jerome was as distant as that with Uncle Nick. Other than an episode with a tuberculous bull, described elsewhere, he rarely bothered

with us. On the other hand, probably because they were childless, his wife Aunt Mildy seemed glad to see us and always gave us tea and scones. Until I asked her not to do so – I never did like sweet tea – she used to put so many lumps of sugar in the cup of tea – and it was rationed then – until the top one protruded from the surface of the tea; a dissolving, tiny, square island.

In the absence of our innately sensible older brother – probably then in boarding school – when Nick and I were in her dairy one day we started to pelt each other with gobs of the abundant thick cream ready to be churned into butter. We missed more often than we hit and much of it finished up stuck to the walls of the dairy. We tried to efface the evidence but failed. Aunt Mildy was justifiably miffed but that I recall was all, there were no repercussions.

Given his long record of neglect I was also surprised when later Uncle Jerome showed interest in my career. Though I had decided to do medicine it was more of a default decision than anything else and after or during my pre-med year, applied to the Dublin Vetinary College. There were no vacancies for two years and I decided to continue with medicine.

Later when I mentioned this to Uncle Jerome he was quite upset and asked why I hadn't talked to him about it as the then Dean of the Vetinary College was an old friend and he was sure he could have got me in straightaway. Knowing Ireland this was certainly possible. As there was no other vetinarian in the family and he was childless if I had joined him he might well have left me his practice, farm and fine house.

The youngest Pomeroy was cocky, natty, little Uncle Bill the banker. We only saw him occasionally. His main importance to us was his children. Around our age, they occasionally visited, their presence a welcome change.

Unmentioned entirely was the oldest brother Bernard. For reasons now forgotten, he had never been the apple of either parent's eye.

Later in life he seems to have deepened the rift by 'taking to the drink' and worse, married beneath him. He was cut off from

the family. He died the same year as his mother, as far as I know, still estranged from her and his siblings. When his widow died a few years later their three daughters Mary, Angela and Stella probably left penniless, joined us at Willowbrook. All are dead now; only the oldest Mary married. Concerning this union my mother commented: "*Like her father before her she married beneath her*."

Poor Aunt Margaret and Aunt Van, stiffed yet again with another of their married sibling's offspring; all the responsibilities and none of the joys. And that was not the end of it. When they were old they found themselves stuck with looking after their brother Jer the Vet during his last five or so senile, largely bedridden years. The Aunts had their faults but they were not without great compensating virtues. And the truth of the matter is damn little thanks they got from any of us.

Grave of Nicholas Pomeroy (CSA) in Millstreet cemetery

John Cronin and friends

Sometime in the late nineteen fifties I got a lift from Dublin to Millstreet with a friend, Mike Philcox, a geologist who had business elsewhere. En route we stopped at the Sandpit House Pub in Duhallow that I knew had been John Cronin's 'local' when he lived in Ploverfield.

Out of curiosity I asked the middle aged, tough looking woman who served us if she had ever heard of him. She replied she had indeed and asked me how I knew him. I didn't give her the satisfaction of telling her but mentioned truthfully enough I used to go to race meetings with him. I did not mention only because he was by then married to my Aunt Van and we sometimes accompanied them to the Killarney and or Limerick Junction races.

Annoyed but clearly intrigued she said almost belligerently: "*I'll have you* (placed) *yet my hard man"* before going off to serve other customers. We left before she got a chance.

Nominally a farmer, John Cronin loved the whole racetrack, gambling shtick, skullduggery and all. He owned, bred and raced greyhounds and in his younger days raced horses. He had some good stories to tell of his younger days. Harry the last of Leaders of Mount Leader and Dr. Pat O'Callaghan the Olympic hammer throwing double gold medalist were it seemed among his racing/gambling associates.

He related one particular episode that also involved our first cousin Dr. Des Kelly, then a UCD medical student. Des confirmed the story. If John, Des and his friends benefited from the scam for that is what it was and apparently they did, they were not the main beneficiary and nor I might add the main risk taker.

I have no idea exactly when or how John first met X but it was almost certainly through a mutual interest in horse racing. Though X was a good generation younger than John they must have been good friends.

X, as his later record shows, was a genius when it came to horses, a talent that maybe the much older John spotted early. X was also ambitious. His trouble was that he was poor or at best, to use a bit of a worn old cliché 'a man of modest means' and in the racing world modest means, not to mind poverty, simply didn't then and no doubt still don't now cut it and 'cut it' in the racing world is what he wanted to do.

It seems that quite early in his career X had a horse at his modest stable though whether it was his or someone else's I don't know but probably his and he knew it was a much better animal than its breeding might suggest.

X probably in cahoots with John, ran this horse at a few minor race meetings around the country to give it the feel of the track but at the same time gave the jockey strict instructions not to win. He then entered it for a more important race at one of the Dublin area race tracks instructing the jockey to go for it this time. Without obvious good breeding or much of a record and a largely unknown trainer, the horse was considered a rank outsider with odds that reflected this general view of its chances. X, sure of his horse, decided to bet everything he could beg, borrow or steal on it.

However, he and John knew if either he or someone else put one or maybe two large bets on it, not only would that opening price drop quickly and dramatically but if the horse won the bookies would cry foul and demand a Stewards' inquiry. This would leave X with the unenviable task of trying to explain to the Stewards the remarkable change in performance of such an outsider, a performance that happened to coincide with a heavy bet or two placed on it. It would look too much like an obvious fiddle and probably would not get by the Stewards. If that happened it would have consequences for X.

To avoid such an inquiry or at least give X a more plausible case to answer if there was such an inquiry while at the same enabling him and/or John to put a large sum on it they came up with a scheme that, though probably not original was more likely to get by the race course Stewards than the one or a few big bet option.

The plan depended on the fact that at race meetings, unlike in North America in Ireland and England, most betting was and it seems still is done with individual 'on course' bookmakers of which there was then a large number in each enclosure. A key aspect regarding this way of betting rather than with a 'tote' or para-mutuel system is that if the punter backs a winner he or she got/gets the odds the bookies offer on that winner at the time the punter places the bet. His or her winnings are not affected by the total money put on after the bet is placed. That is, if the odds lengthen the punter doesn't benefit if the horse wins, and if the odds shorten he or she doesn't lose. What is also worth noting is that in the absence then of modern almost instantaneous electronic communication methods, the amount of money being laid on a particular horse particularly if it was placed in relatively small amounts with a wide variety of bookies, meant a large amount could be put on a horse before the bookies realised and shortened the odds to save themselves from taking too much of a bath.

In order to take advantage of these factors John invited our first cousin Des Kelly and ten or so of his fellow UCD medical students to a free day at the races plus pocket money plus £50 each to bet in small amounts at a variety of bookies around the enclosure. £50 may not seem much now but to give some practical idea of its value then, ten years later, the entire cost of my first year at Trinity College - fees, residence food etc. - was £295, ten years earlier it would have cost considerably less. This meant between them these students alone bet about £500 and if the horse was say 10:1 and the price may have been even longer than that, the bookies were down £5,000 from these bets alone. Since it was quite likely there were others involved in the scheme, maybe a lot more, though John was far too canny a character to let Des and his friends know one way or the other and maybe X didn't let John know the full amount being put on either.

He was I believe hauled before the Stewards but with the bets placed the way they were they were unable to nail him and

he got off with it. If John, Des and his friends did well out of the deal, and no doubt they did, X cleaned up enough to put him on the road to success and he never looked back, not even at John whom he seems to have dropped thereafter from his group of close friends. It matters little to either now. It is a long while since Charon ferried John Cronin across the River Styx to Hades and if many years later, X too has now made that same journey.

On one occasion only that I remember, John mentioned he had been in an IRA Flying Column during the Independence campaign. He certainly didn't paint his own part in anything like heroic colours. But having been a semi-professional gambler he had the necessary impenetrable poker face needed for that game and he was no braggart. Goodness knows what part if any he played in the campaign.

He had a long standing passion for Aunt Van but they didn't tie the knot until 1948.

Around the time of his marriage he sold his own place, Ploverfield, and they rented Keale House near Millstreet. Whether this was because Aunt Van refused to live in Ploverfield or he needed the money or what I don't know but he was no great farmer and the war must have been a particularly hard time in the always risky dog and horse racing business. He could not have been too flush

At some point after they got married he somehow got a contract to supply about 40 greyhounds for Nigerian businessman J.K. Randle who owned a successful horse racing track in Lagos and wanted to get into dog racing. It was a great opportunity for John.

At some point 'JK' announced he wanted to visit and see how things were shaping up concerning the dogs. John was only too delighted as it showed 'JK' was serious. 'JK' booked his air ticket and John went to Shannon Airport to pick him up. He decided he would do it properly and hired local taxi driver Dermy Murphy with his well kept, dog hair free, car.

Of course neither 'JK' nor John knew what the other looked

like but in those days 'planes were smaller and flying was much more rare and relatively expensive. This being the case there were probably no more than one or two flights into Shannon each day and John thought, reasonably enough, there would be no difficulty with them making contact at the arrival gate but passenger after passenger went by and none came forward to identify himself.

Baffled and no doubt worried he was not sure what to do. There had been one passenger he could hardly miss nevertheless he was so different he had missed him. He was large black man in flowing African garb standing some distance from them. Those were still colonial times and it had not crossed John's mind that J.K. Randle would be a black African. Eventually Dermy touched him on the sleeve and said: "*Mr. Cronin, I think that's your man over there*."

Chief 'JK' turned out to be a large, jolly, outgoing, confident man with whom John got along famously and introduced him to everybody in Millstreet where he became quite a sensation. 'JK' apparently was happy with the dogs and the arrangements John had made. It looked as though John had the contract of a lifetime. But life too is a gamble and shortly after 'JK' returned to Lagos he had a massive heart attack (1956) and died instantly. The deal was cancelled.

At that time I was a medical student and one of probably the brightest, most able, good natured students in my year was a Nigerian 'Femi' ('Willy' to us) Williams (he later became a very distinguished researcher and teacher in Nigeria) and I asked him if he had ever heard of J.K. Randle. 'Willy' was very surprised to hear I had heard of 'JK' and beyond surprised to hear he had stayed with my Aunt and her husband in Co. Cork. He told me that the, by then I think recently dead, Chief 'JK' had been one of the best known, most colourful and wealthiest men in Nigeria.

Poor old John; he was always very pleasant to us. He never got a 'gig' like that again. Soon they could no longer afford to live in Keale House and no doubt to Aunt Van's great chagrin,

had to rent a new thoroughly depressing bungalow on the outskirts of Millstreet. As he aged he fell into a profound depression and more or less gradually faded away.

Among other things, he taught us a silly little ditty I still remember:

" Timothy McCarthy was very nearly tight
He walked across a meadow at ten o'clock at night
Underneath an oak tree there he saw a bull
Waiting for a lunatic to give his tail a pull.
When Timothy arrived up the bull arose
Tim lifted up his hands and banged him on the nose
A minute or two later he was doing a dance
When up came an earthquake and hit him in the pants."

Miss Kenny

Other than that she came from County Mayo and her father knew or was related to John McCormack, the famous tenor of his time I know virtually nothing about Miss Kenny's background except that, prior to being hired to look after us, she had spent most if not all of her working life as a nanny in Catholic Continental Europe.

Compared to their English, mostly Protestant sisters, Irish nannies had an extra string to their nannerly bows in much of Catholic Europe; not only did they speak English they were Catholic. Consequently as a young woman Miss Kenny it seems had gone to Spain as a nanny for a wealthy aristocratic family. Similar stints followed in semi-Catholic France, Catholic Portugal and possibly elsewhere.

By the time we became her charges, apart from English I believe she spoke Portuguese, Spanish, French and given that she came from Co. Mayo, possibly some Irish as well.

She occasionally spoke of those times though I recall only one of her stories. In Portugal returning home alone one night, she heard the soft pad of animal feet behind her. She turned her light towards the sound and saw what she thought was a wolf. Not impossible, even to-day wolves are the main predators of wild boar in Portugal's Montesinho National Park. Frightened, she kept the beam on it and went on. The wolf followed but kept its distance. Even if it was a wolf she was probably in less danger than she imagined. There is little evidence wolves attack people except under extreme circumstances. A figment, a story, a dog? We were her last clutch. If we didn't outright kill her, we must at least have added a good large screw or two or three to her coffin.

I have a photo of her, Nick and me taken in our London garden. Nick was probably about ten. Her head appears between and behind Nick's and mine. Her head pokes only a few inches

above us. Probably in her mid or late fifties bespectacled with short grey hair, her facial features are reminiscent of those of Darcy Magee, the former 'Young Irelander' one of the fathers of the Canadian Confederation and the only one assassinated. Both had unmistakable Irish faces of a certain rough hewn sort.

At the time she started to look after us she had already been through the cycle of getting to know, living with, and departing from at least three sets of children. Some of whom she had loved dearly and was loved by them in return. At least one, a Spaniard, kept in contact with her for many years, maybe until she died.

Such strong attachment to a nanny was not an unusual phenomenon. Winston Churchill and his brother Jack were much closer to their nanny 'Mrs.' Everest than to their socially ambitious, intimidating, American mother with significant beneficial, historic repercussions for the poor of England (see Violet Bonham Carter's 'Winston Churchill An intimate Portrait').

Given her past, by the time she came in my parents' employment I suspect the tank of her emotional reserves was nearly empty. She was just not up to getting as involved with yet another set of children. Children from whom she knew she would again eventually be parted. In terms of relating to us I suspect her stance was similar to that of our Aunts, maintaining some distance made sense. That this strategy did not entirely succeed became clear later.

Not surprisingly perhaps, for she was a kind, decent soul and among other things, read to us when we went to bed. One of these tales was a western 'The Singing Outlaw.' The flawed hero of the yarn was a handsome, carolling, young outlaw who falls in love with a young woman. He courts her at night like Romeo courted Juliet in Gounod's opera, more than once giving mellifluous voice to his feelings below her balcony before galloping off pursued by the sheriff and his posse. If not entirely won over, her heart or wherever is warmed by her gallant suitor. Unsurprisingly her respectable parents were not pleased with the outlaw's attentions.

It so happened, in charge of a railroad being built through the district is an unmarried engineer. He falls for the same girl. There is though a fly in his ointment, a boil on his butt. He is unable to find a route for the railbed through a local swamp and his employers are losing patience. Unlike the engineer the outlaw knows a way through. Initially he won't reveal this to his rival and you can hardly blame him.

Through some chicanery the outlaw is severely wounded in a gun fight with the Sheriff and his posse. He escapes but knows he is dying. As a last gesture, he nobly shows the engineer the way through the swamp. He thus saves the engineer's job and with blessings of her Mum and Dad she accepts the engineer once the outlaw is safely and permanently pushing up daisies which he conveniently soon is. Such was Miss Kenny's reading; poor Miss Kenny.

On a quite different occasion when Nick was about three or four years old, at a gathering of a few standing adults, unmistakable olfactory evidence emerged that one of these adults had dropped a silent but significant one. With his nose at about the correct height and not being terribly au fait with the social niceties Nick decided to carry out an immediate empirical investigation (no wonder he became an engineer); he went behind each of them and sniffed. He concluded from this, hands on or more correctly nose almost on, bit of sleuthing that the culprit was Miss Kenny and announced his findings. Poor lady, she was dreadfully embarrassed.

Given her tendency to keep her distance the reverse was equally true. We tended to keep our distance from her and, as with the Aunts our relationship remained, if not cold, cool, ambivalent. Her coolness towards us may have had a number of roots. One young boy on his own can be obnoxious, three together can be hellish. Furthermore her new situation may not have been to her liking; in fact a bit of a social comedown. It may well have been that the socially hyper conscious, upper middle class Pomeroys simply did not measure up to the continental aristocrats whom she implied were her previous

employers. How mortified the Pomeroys would have been to realise Miss Kenny secretly despised them.

At some point probably shortly after we arrived in Willowbrook in 1939, Dick had attended the nun run primary school in Millstreet some two kilometres away. His stay was fairly brief. Maybe he dawdled too much on the way home, or it was feared he associated too much with 'common' boys, and thereby be on the road to social perdition. After that, until he went to Presentation College, Bray, in Co. Wicklow as a boarder in 1944 Miss Kenny was stuck with the three of us. Apart from her teaching responsibilities she had to share a bed with Nick and me; her room was our room. She had no privacy. It could not have been an easy life. Sometimes half deliberately, we goaded Miss Kenny into losing her temper and she would thump us (harmlessly) on the shoulder. It was a tribute to her patience and self control she went no further. These harmless blows had this distinction. They were the only form of corporal punishment we ever received until boarding school. Corporal punishment cost serious money.

Taking our lead from 'the boss' (brother Dick), we were not enthusiastic scholars and sometimes with the covert and even overt connivance of Aunt Margaret, took off to help the men with some farm job or enjoy some other activity. On these occasions poor Miss Kenny would call us and blow her whistle from the windows of the house to indicate it was time for us to come back and *"do our lessons."* We usually finished up doing so but took our time. One such occasion I distinctly remember.

September or late August was the threshing season. That year the dirt roads were soft indicating it must have been a wet summer. Bill Twomey with his threshing machine was in the area and to Aunt Margaret's great relief, was due to thresh her grain after he had dealt with the Moynihans and Healys – neighbours across the valley. Neither of whom had that much grain crops to thresh. If all went well he should be in Willowbrook by the afternoon and get her threshing done by nightfall.

All did not go well. To reach the Moynihan and Healy farms, Bill had to haul the threshing machine up 'Fitz's Height,' a short, steep hill only half a kilometre away from Willowbrook and visible from the dining room window. In dry conditions Bill's old Fordson tractor could do this without difficulty. On the rain softened 'dirt' road instead of continuing to move steadily uphill the tractor's two steel spiked wheels spun and dug in. Progress came to a halt.

Since we could clearly see and hear this carry-on the temptation was too great. After breakfast, instead of joining Miss Kenny for our morning 'lessons' as we should have done led by Dick, we took off. When we got there despite the noise of the tractor, the neighing of horses, the barking of dogs, the sound of men's voices and the general kafuffle we could still clearly hear the shrill sound of Miss K's whistle and her voice calling us. She hadn't a chance.

Prior to our arrival someone must have gone for help because by the time we got there half the farmers in the 'hood' were on the scene some with, some without their horses, others to watch, talk, discuss and dispute the merits and demerits of various plans, the weather, the situation in general.

Eventually, with the help of horses, extended traces, much to-ing and fro-ing, pushing and shoving and more talk, the threshing machine was on its way and we had to return to face Miss Kenny. She got the usual excuses, we forgot, we didn't hear her and so on and so forth and Aunt Margaret as usual made excuses for us. Poor Miss Kenny, no wonder she had her first stroke while still relatively young.

Beyond a disinterest in the activities of the farm in general there was one specific thing Miss Kenny hated; the fearful squeals of a pig being slaughtered. But I don't remember her refusing the fresh pork, sausages and salty bacon and the screams of those dying pigs were preludes to those tasty sausages and the bacon.

On the rare days (once or twice a year maybe) when killing a pig was on the agenda duly warned, she went for a long walk.

It was I think on one of these pig slaughter-avoiding walks she had her first 'turn' of some sort, probably a minor stroke. She must have had a good recovery from this as she came to London in 1945 and remained my teacher until, in September 1946, when we all three left together for boarding school. I say "my" because during that first post-war year in London, Dick remained at boarding school in Ireland and Nick a day pupil at a local convent school – I was too old for this latter institution - and so was left alone with her.

Prior to the stroke she had been weakened by a bout of pneumonia before antibiotics were available. Around the same time Aunt Van contracted this serious, not infrequently, fatal illness. They both survived the notorious 'crisis' of pneumonia, that point when pneumococcus pneumoniae defeated the patient's system and the patient died or when the disease was defeated by the patient's system and the patient survived though invariably weak and exhausted.

Aunt Van, a robust healthy woman, was so debilitated, after her 'crisis' that to get from a lying to a sitting position she had to pull herself up by a rope tied like a reins to the bedposts at the foot of her bed. I don't think Miss Kenny ever regained her previous level of health.

Our departures to boarding school in September 1946 removed Miss Kenny's functional value to the family and with boarding school fees to pay our parents could ill afford to keep her but were troubled by the necessity of having to let her go.

Even if Miss Kenny had it in her to take on yet another bunch of small children which she probably didn't, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, with the devastation of Europe that resulted, it is unlikely there was much demand for nannies on either the winning or losing sides. For whatever reason or combination of reasons she retired.

I believe with help from our parents and possibly the previously mentioned Spaniard, Miss Kenny bought a small cottage in Crossmalina in her native Co. Mayo and there she repaired. As might be expected having spent most of her life

away she found herself a virtual stranger in her native Co. Mayo.

Not long after her retirement Miss Kenny had at least one more major stroke. She may have written expressing a wish to see us all once again. Maybe still feeling guilty my mother announced we would visit her en famille in the summer.

At the time Irish roads were mostly narrow, twisting and unpaved (untarred), well suited to horse traffic but not to cars. Not that there was many cars on the Irish roads at the time. Road signs were few, bent and unreliable. By to-day's standards though maybe safer, in terms of time and difficulty, the journey from Millstreet, Co. Cork to Crossmalina Co. Mayo was far more arduous, at least two full days each way if I remember rightly.

A saving grace was that my father at the time had acquired a second hand Armstrong Sidley, an upmarket English make of car long since gone to the automobile Valhalla. It had to be second hand, new cars were virtually impossible to get in post-war England; spacious and comfortable, in the Ireland of the time, it would have impressed.

At one point we stopped on the bank of a river by an abandoned castle with an extant second story. This was unusual compared to most of such ruins that dot the Irish countryside. A lock and chain secured the iron entrance gate. Without noticing he was gone we heard a call from the battlements; it was Dick. He had scaled the gate and made his way to the top.

The river I believe was the Ratty near where it enters the Shannon and the castle, Bunratty, an O'Brien stronghold at one time. Not far from Shannon Airport, Bunratty was later bought for very little by an Englishman (Lord Gort) who tarted it up and turned into one of Ireland's best known tourist traps mostly providing spurious mediaeval banquets for American tourists. Years later Nick worked as an engineer on the nearby new Bunratty Bridge.

Our journey took us through Eyre Square in the centre of Galway. The city was then little more than a sleepy country town where donkey carts and bicycles heavily outnumbered

cars. As we drove through the square to our great surprise who should we see but Michael Gogarty (grandson of Oliver St. Gogarty) on a bicycle. He was a friend (and fellow ardent Arsenal supporter) from our English boarding school of the time. Despite pleas our parents wouldn't stop.

My only memory of Miss Kenny from that visit is the sight of her standing in her cottage doorway as we drove away. She is wearing a long dark dress, leaning on a walking stick, grey hair, pale face turned towards us, the picture of abject loneliness and desolation. She died not long after. Years later on a journey west from Dublin to Achill Island in Co. Mayo I looked for her grave in the Crossmalina graveyard but I couldn't find it; not that I spent that much time looking.

J.F.X. ('Alphabet') O'Brien, 1900

Downstairs

Apart from the upstairs/downstairs class/manners/ behavioural divides, there were others. Those upstairs were middle-aged, fixtures and female; downstairs young, transient, and two of the three male.

As might be expected, distinctive individuals as these men and women may have been they had characteristics in common. They were mostly cheerful, talkative, good natured, largely uncomplaining, enduring, and often diversely skilful and rarely suffered serious illness or injury. At the same time and this was particularly true of the men, they were crude, rude, blasphemous and the association of godliness and cleanliness was not a principle they deeply cherished though, as noted previously the circumstances in which they lived gave them little alternative.

Given the inaccessibility to any and all forms of contraception most likely they came from large families sharing none too clean beds with same sex siblings and diets barely adequate in quality, variety or quantity. I doubt if any had education beyond the primary level and would almost routinely have received brutal corporal punishment at school and some of the same at home.

Given this scenario no wonder they didn't complain much about the lack of plumbing or anything else for that matter. They most likely had never known anything much different and probably had never been better fed. Though they may have done so, I have no memory of any of the men complaining even about their miserable bedroom and shared double bed. They were in truth a Spartan lot.

At that time, provided relations between employer and employee remained copasetic, farm workers (and I think maids) usually remained with their employers for periods of one, two, three, or more years duration, starting and ending around Christmas time.

The younger (junior) men rarely stayed more than a year,

the older (senior) men sometimes for two or even longer. Occasionally one spent most of his or her life with the same employer. Jer Carty toiled (though "toiled" is pushing it a bit in Jer's case) for Uncle Jerome for many years. More rarely employer/employee associations spanned generations. According to my mother an old man called Johnny Cronin told her that members of his family had worked for the Pomeroys of Clara since they acquired it in 1787.

Apart from being hard physical labour even in those largely pre-mechanised farming times, farmwork could be dangerous. Horses and bulls are big unpredictable animals, the latter in particular. Even cows have their tantrums. Nevertheless I have no memory of any of them complaining of the danger or of having to work too hard or of illness or injury except on one occasion.

Joe did cut off the tip of a finger while sharpening the hay knife and came into the kitchen in something of a panic, bleeding profusely. He briefly fainted; for me putting a disappointing dent in his godlike status. According to the account he gave later as the severed finger tip fell to the ground, a duck came waddling along quack, quack, quacking as is the wont of ducks and gobbled it up delighted to get such an unexpected, tasty, nourishing snack. No doubt that duck was on the menu some time later.

A hay knife was a large knife with a blade about two feet long and nine inches deep. The long axis of the handle was at right angles to the blade. It was used for cutting hay from the hay 'benches' piled up in a barn.

The importance of these men to us was, being functionally fatherless, as it were, to some extent, they filled that paternal vacuum. Whether any of them realised this is a moot point, but it left us unduly vulnerable to their criticism in an age when it was considered normal to tease, bait, frighten, and ridicule children.

I have vivid memories of several of those men and can still put names or nicknames to many of them: Dinny Pat Taid,

Timmy 'Pettsy,' Taid Murphy, Joe, Dinny Buckley, Willy, Timmy, 'Tiny' Cashman and 'Dony' (rhymes with pony).

The earliest I can recall was Dinny Pat Taid ('Dinny-Pat-Taid' as in spade). He must have arrived on the scene sometime in the early forties, moved comet-like across our childish horizon for a year or so and then disappeared again.

It was Dinny's horsemanship that made the lasting impression. Even in his heavy working boots he could stand upright on a moving horse's back or leap-frog over its rump and without saddle, halter, winkers or reins, and gallop off at full speed. A failed former trick circus rider down on his luck in the dirty thirties or what; who knows?

As with his successors we knew little or nothing of their backgrounds and they rarely enlightened us. One of those rarities was Taid Murphy's account of the origin of his deformed finger. When he was a small child his older brother told him to put his finger on a table, look up at the sky and he would see angels. Trustfully he put his finger on the table and looked up. His brother then brought the hammer he had hidden behind his back down on his finger smashing it. Untreated the finger set deformed.

Taid was one of the juniors during Joe's reign as senior man. He was older than most juniors, a blond haired, tough, uncouth, rough diamond. Taid: "*pull my finger Rye* (Roy was Dick's nickname then) *I have a cromp in it*." 'Rye' did as requested and this was followed by a loud fart and a roar of laughter from Taid. Dick discomfited.

When he ventured to Millstreet for few pints at the week-end, fights seemed to follow. Taid explained away the repeated cut lips, missing teeth and black eyes by claiming they were 'bowling' accidents. 'Bowling' to rhyme with 'howling.' A game then more or less confined to Co. Cork and I gather parts of Co. Armagh. It was played with solid steel balls of maybe two or three inches in diameter weighing (I think) a pound or so. The object is/was to cover a fixed distance of two or three miles with as few throws as possible. The player with the least throws wins.

At a Willowbrook threshing most likely after a few bottles of stout, he beat up poor Jimmy Cotter who, apart from being a rabbit hunter and a bit of a poacher, was as harmless as he was small. Taid thought nothing of punching a horse in the mouth or giving it a boot in the belly if it didn't respond the way he wanted.

At the same time he was a cheerful fellow and mostly kind enough to us. On long winter evenings he happily played hide and seek with us downstairs all too often successfully making us laugh to reveal where we were. One such evening followed Dick's return from his first term at 'Prez Bray' a boarding school near Dublin. In his few short months away, he had acquired a thick Dublin accent (lost in a few days and never recovered). In one round of hide and seek Taid and I were the first to 'escape' to the chairs in the kitchen. Sitting beside me he said: "*Hasn't Rye got awful quare talk*?" Like Taid, having never heard a Dublin accent before, I heartily concurred.

He knew several songs of the 'come-all-ye' variety and took the trouble to teach us a long rambling one 'The Dingle Puck Goat' that my brothers and I remember to this day. His tuition started one winter's evening when the job of looking after a farrowing sow fell to him and we joined him in the usual labour unit – the corner piggery. The reason for overseeing the process was to prevent the sow from accidentally rolling on one or more of her new born or having one or two for a snack.

A further duty of the porcine midwife was to sever the umbilical cord of each bonham ('bonuve') as it hit the deck. The cord being quite soft he showed us how to do this by squeezing it between thumb and finger, a longer thumbnail helped.

Later, nearly always using a sterile scissors not my thumb nail, I severed and tied a number of human umbilical cords. The one exception took place when working for a Dublin general practice night relief service when a call turned out to be a delivery for which I was unprepared. The frightened unmarried, (and probably disgraced thereby), young country couple had

only just moved in and had virtually nothing with them. After a search I found a kitchen knife but unable to find any tread or string, had to use one of my shoe laces as a tie.

Taid like most of the other men smoked and smoking was an expensive habit for a farm labourer. They rarely bought anything but Wills Woodbines, the cheapest, in five cigarette paper packages and smoked each down to the last shreds of tobacco. According to a medical student friend, a relative of his, to whom he left I think £5,000, a lot of money in those days, wealthy Mr. Wills himself smoked only Woodbines and I believe, duly died of cancer of the lung.

Matches too cost money and at times the men took a smouldering sod of turf to the fields with them to save the price of matches.

Paidric (Pawrick) was a short, broad, powerful, slow moving, lazy, incompetent man, a true aficionado of the do-as-little-as-possible approach to work. He was particularly brutal to horses and cattle. Consequently he had endless trouble with them. He of course blamed the animals nor his incompetence.

In the fields one warm summer's day – it must have been warm as we had no shirts on – he called five or six year old Nick, over to him and at close range threw a sandwich of pig manure between two 'scrows' (pieces of sod) at Nick hitting him fairly and squarely in the midriff. At the point of contact of course the contents spilled out over his belly. Paidric and the other man nearly wet themselves laughing. Poor Nick didn't see the joke at all and I suppose I wouldn't either if I had been the target but I wasn't. I thought it pretty funny too. Later seeing Nick and me in the yard but not realising Aunt Margaret was there too but out his line of vision Paidrick shouted: "*Nickeen did you get the pig shit off your belly*?" The conversation came to an abrupt halt when Aunt Margaret hove into his view.

Willy was an odd little fellow small, harmless, meek and mild. His lack of suitability for farmwork précised by neighbour, Jack Moynihan's, comment: "*He's not a bad little fella but yirra he's too wake* (weak)."

For some reason Willy was admitted to the dreadful mediaeval-style Cork County Lunatic Asylum (the 'Big House') outside Cork for a time. On his return with a touching naiveté he said: "*Yirra, I wasn't as bad at all as mosht of 'em*."

With his meagre funds he bought a suit or maybe it was a dinner jacket that Aunt Van found him brushing one evening. This suggested to her an ambition for the finer things of life and she expressed pity for him. This was unusual as, apart from not being the pitying type, she seemed hardly aware of the working men's existence.

'Dony' I remember only because in the time between our departure to London in November 1945 to our return in July 1946 he seemed to have become a foot taller and his voice had broken. In those months probably eating better than he ever had in his life he had sprung up like a weed and left childhood for adolescence.

Sometime around the late nineteen forties my brothers and I received a present of new bike to share which we did amicably enough aware of how lucky we were to have even one new bike between us. Such items then were expensive and hard to find.

Around the same time another Timmy arrived on the scene as the junior man. After work, if he had spare cash in his pocket, he regularly headed to the town for stout and company. Tired of walking, the maybe two kilometres each way he managed to find a frame here, a wheel there, enough eventually to build a mongrel bike of sorts. This velocipede did not include such refinements as mudguards, gears, lights or brakes.

One evening he challenged me to a race from Willowbrook to Shea's Cross, about 500 metres down the road towards Millstreet. At that cross a steep road joined the road we were on. There was a brook that passed under it.

Given the differences between our bikes I rapidly drew further and further ahead. Expecting some trickery from Timmy I kept going for another hundred metres or so beyond the cross. To my surprise when I looked back there was no sign of him and I returned to the cross and waited; still no sign.

Then I heard a groan emanating from the direction of the brook where it disappeared under the road on the other side of the stone ditch and I looked over. Timmy was sitting in the rocky stream with the bike draped around his neck like a large grotesque collar.

He had it seemed reached the finish line behind me and, intending to stop in the absence of brakes he had tried to do so by turning ninety degrees sharp right up Shea's Height. Impossible at the speed he was going, he hit the stone ditch at speed. When the front wheel hit the stone ditch the bike stopped dead. Inertia took him on and somersaulting head over heels he landed in the sitting position among the rocks and water of the shallow stream. From the apex of this airy journey to where he landed must have been a fall of three metres or more. To add the clichéd insult to injury, already hurt as he put it himself: "*The bleddy bike came after me and shtruck me agin*." Wet, bruised, battered, bikeless but undaunted he headed off on foot to Millstreet for his pints. He was back at work next day.

Joe arrived as senior man around the time the Battle of Stalingrad ended (early 1943). His stayed as Russians pushed the Germans further and further west in what was probably the most ferocious and deadly land war in history but, life being what it is, his tenure at Willowbrook had more effect on me than that epic military conflict.

In his late twenties or early thirties, he was tall for the time, well built, a good worker and, no slouch on a horseback though not a patch on Dinny Pat Taid. He too could be rough enough with horses.

Joe seemed to like children and at first was pleasant to us even though we must have been more than a bit of a nuisance for whenever we had the opportunity we followed him around like pups. At first the Aunts too seemed to trust and respect him more than other workmen.

Among other things he told us stories some of which more than likely had an ancient provenance, the last remnants of the old Seanachai (story teller) tradition.

The anchor of one of Joe's stories was a large, diamond shaped rock that stood upright on one end, the other protruded four or five feet above the ground in the middle of the 'side' field. Almost certainly it was not a natural feature such as a glacial erratic but a product of human endeavour, put there to mark a grave or some other long forgotten happening.

Joe began the story unoriginally enough with: "*There were giants in the world in them days*." The essence of the tale was that in the afore mentioned "*them days*" the king of the local giants had decided to build a palace somewhere in the vicinity of the Caherbarna Mountain, some ten kilometres to the west. To get the necessary building material the king decreed that his subjects each bring him a rock for its construction.

When, already on the move with their huge rocks on their giant shoulders, the king decided not to build after all. Maybe his mortgage didn't come through or he was refused planning permission, maybe his queen changed her mind, who knows? The decision made, he sent messengers to countermand his previous order. Hearing of the change of plan, the giants dropped their rocks wherever they were and went home; thus the many big rocks strewn around the locality including the one located in the 'side field.' Erratic in temperament as that monarch may have been but, according to Joe's story these rocks were not erratics – that's terrible.

He used to say he had a great story about: "*The shower of ould hags that fell next week*" but he didn't have the time to tell it just then. For us that time never arrived and the story remained only a tantalising title and that, most likely is all it ever was.

During Joe's tenure the maid of the time was one Maria. My memory is that she was older and maybe tougher than other Willowbrook maids. Both youthful and in robust good health with the necessary hormones coursing through their veins Joe and Maria it seems became more than just good friends and, since their unlocked rooms were side by side it needs little imagination to guess what they got up to in the middle of the night and it was probably not long discussions about the

philosophy of Wittgenstein.

The natural consequence of this activity are easy enough to guess. The immediate result was Maria suddenly left Willowbrook and Joe and she quickly got married. A baby soon followed and the newly wedded couple plus baby went to live in a pretty primitive two roomed cottage of Aunt Margaret's at the north eastern end of the farm (the 'top of the land'). Given the proximity of the men's bedrooms it was surprising the Joe/ Maria scenario was not a repetitive one but that I was aware, it was not.

Though we as usual were told nothing about what had taken place it was all too clear relations between upstairs and downstairs had soured drastically and it had something to do with Maria. Though Joe did not, like Maria, suddenly disappear he was a changed, angry man. Obviously what had been done, and probably said to him, rankled deeply. Despite this he stayed on probably because he and Aunt Margaret were mutually dependent. He needed her job and she needed his work. They had to get along somehow until she could find a replacement and he a new job.

Since the whole kafuffle had nothing to do with us, we assumed our relationship with Joe would remain the same and he would continue as our benign father substitute. This was wishful thinking. Nick and I, innocent bystanders got caught in the cross fire, collateral damage.

Nick and I were made aware of the change one day when Aunt Margaret sent Joe to clear an overflowing drain in a field near the house and we as usual tagged along. I remember clearly while we were walking there being aware something was not right. Joe hardly said a word though visibly agitated. When he had more or less but not quite finished the job, Nick all of four or five, noting this said innocently: "*Joe, give a few more digs*."

In a moment remembered with stark clarity Joe turned on Nick jeering viciously and, mimicking his then childish voice in an exaggerated venomous way, repeating over and over again: "*Joe, give a few more digs. Joe, give a few more digs*" delighted

at the consternation and distress this caused Nick and me only a fraction less.

We were stunned by the sudden verbal assault from a revered figure that had never before been other than friendly. In the self-referential way of children we thought we had done something wrong but had no idea what it was.

Not only did he continue to jeer and tease us, very much the downstairs leader, he egged on the other man and the maid (by then not his wife Maria) to join him in this whenever the opportunity arose, which it often did.

Not close enough to any of our upstairs para-parental trio to consider seeking solace, support or understanding and isolated from other children we had no defence against this continued barrage. It was an unpleasant stressful period in our very young lives.

At one point I tried to get my own back. Joe brought a new reins for the horse from the town. With little idea of who owned what, I thought it was his personal property and cut it in half. He was satisfactorily infuriated, grabbed my arm, and dragged me roughly into the kitchen where Aunt Margaret happened to be. There he almost flung me at her and angrily told her what I had done. It was only then I learnt the reins was hers not his. It was too late then it was already in two pieces. Other than briefly indicating her displeasure she did nothing; poor Aunt Marg, what a pain I was.

There was another curious incident around this tense time. One dark night when we were, as usual, upstairs with our Aunts and Miss Kenny prior to heading off to bed, there was a series of loud bangs outside, behind the house, clearly made by something or someone hitting the galvanised iron roof or sides of the turf shed or the door of the coach house or the gate that separated the open grovelled space outside the hall door from the yard.

Led by Dick and perhaps surprisingly, with our Aunts' permission we went out to investigate. While out there in the dark, and dark it was, though we saw or heard no one, there

were several more such loud bangs that obviously came from objects being bounced off one or other of these galvanised surfaces. After one such bang that came from the coach house door quite near us, despite the dim light we picked up the movement of an object as it rolled down the yard towards us. When it came to rest Dick picked it up. It was a raw potato that a bird had recently pecked. That it seemed was the object used in this instance anyway. After a while we returned to the house none the wiser. Sure enough, the bangs ceased. Such a thing never happened again nor to me at least was it ever mentioned again.

There can be little doubt it was an attempt at least to frighten our Aunts and that I recall, not surprisingly, it did. Presumably the incident was related to what was going on at the time.

Do I blame Joe now? Not really. In that puritanical, censorious society Joe and Maria were in a real fix and I can only conclude that instead of getting some compassion and help from 'upstairs' they got the opposite and with justification he, and probably she, were not pleased. Few of us behave well in such a frame of mind.

By the early fifties with WWII almost a decade in the past, many young Irish countrymen went to work in England and labourers becoming more scarce, the price of labour went up seemingly quicker than farm income. At the same time tractors and the labour saving machinery that went with them, were still rare in those parts. Farming remained almost as labour intensive as ever.

Aunt Margaret tried to solve this dilemma by finding one man capable of doing the work of two by paying him well. The man who took on this dual load was one Dinny Buckley. In his twenties or thereabouts, Dinny was a tough, tireless, enduring, reliable, hardworking, honest, skilled, knowledgeable man with a natural affinity for animals. He should have been almost the ideal farm worker and had he land of his own an excellent farmer. There was another side to him.

Dinny was not a happy camper. Angry, resentful, and morose, he was too intelligent and able to be unaware of the hand fate had dealt him. He particularly resented having to take orders from what he saw as a wealthy, ignorant, old woman.

Though he never said so openly he intended to join the exodus to England; his questions gave him away. For among other things he asked me: "*Do they have dogs in England like Rex I dunno*?" Willowbrook's successive sheep dogs were sensibly all named Rex.

If I had firmly and confidently told him English dogs had six legs I think he would have at least half believed me; not because he was stupid. It was just that for people like him from a poor family, equally poorly educated, with little opportunity to read anything other than an occasional issue of the parochial 'Cork Examiner,' living in a fair degree of isolation, without access to telephones and radio, not to mind television and the internet – then a mere gleam in some science-fiction writer's eye – he had virtually no source of available, reliable information. Inevitably he and many others like him knew astonishingly little about life beyond their native parishes or county not to mind of their country or beyond.

A final note on Dinny. Years before in the early forties a neighbour claimed he had found his wife hanging in their stable. Though the court verdict was suicide it was strongly suspected if the husband himself had not actually put the rope around her neck he had driven her to it. Knowing Dinny and the local turn of mind, I wondered what sort of answer he would give if I asked him directly was it suicide or murder. I knew he would be evasive but was curious to know what form the evasion would take. After a pause and sideways glance he said: "*I dunno. But he didn't have a bit of look* (luck) *since*." A masterpiece, at one and the same time saying everything and nothing.

Getting old and probably under pressure from her two brothers, dealing with Dinny convinced Aunt Margaret to throw in the farming sponge and rented out her land. Since then the farmyard buildings and somewhat later the house began to

deteriorate; a process that continues to this day.

The maids made less of an impression for a variety of reasons. Except for Julia Connors, they rarely stayed more than a year and almost always indoors and downstairs we didn't spend much time with them. Other than Julia I can name only Maria.

An early memory. Quiet, shy Jimmy Connors the harness maker, working at his trade at an upstairs window in the lower loft. Julia standing at the bottom of the lower yard shaking her fist at him and shouting: "*I'll marry you yet Jimmy Connors*." She did but they had no children.

As mentioned previously, upstairs prudery reigned. This may have been less the case downstairs though by modern standards they were still prudish enough. Hardly surprising, the working men and maids too were all Catholic educated and regular mass goers. They had to be. Employment would have been hard to get if they did not. This meant the men and the maids too would have been subject to the regular, sexually preoccupied, brimstone-stinking sermons we all heard too regularly at Sunday mass and could no more have avoided being aware of the Church's distorted sexual pre-occupation than any other section of the community.

There were two maids who in their different ways bucked this trend. One was the aforementioned Maria. The other an earthy girl whose name has long since faded, was the opposite of prudish in word and deed. The clerical message had certainly not damped her spirit. Somehow I got to know this and found I could and did say things to her I would not have dreamt of saying to anyone else. She was equally candid with me though the only actual quote of hers can I remember is: "*Yirra, it's the same between a man and a woman as it is with a bull and a cow,*" pertinent, pithy information for a boy of eight or nine living in a sea of sexual silence. Her behaviour was equally uninhibited.

The kitchen opened into the scullery where there was a cold tap three feet or so above a metal grating in the floor. The tap and grating below, was used to fill buckets or other large vessels

with water for washing the potatoes and the like. Against a wall nearby was a white side table on which were buckers of spring drinking water re-filled daily from a well near the brook below the house.

Downstairs, as previously mentioned there were no toilet facilities of any kind. When there were people upstairs but they alone downstairs, obviously the sensible thing for the maids to do when they needed to empty their bladders was to use this grating rather than go outside to find a private corner behind a bush or in the 'black hole,' an underground windowless passage-way that opened near the side door and ended in a damp windowless room almost directly under the hall door. I presume when alone in the house, most of them had the common sense to use the toilet upstairs.

The difference in this girl's case was that in the middle of conversations, she thought nothing of going out to scullery just off the kitchen, pulling down her knickers, squatting down and peeing into the grating without a pause in what she was saying. On one such occasion I was bold enough to ask her to give me 'a look.' She refused but seemed neither shocked nor surprised. Emboldened further I gave her a push to unbalance her hoping she would have to stand up at least partially with her knickers down so I could get that 'look.' I did unbalance her and she did partially stand up but I failed in my endeavour. She wasn't in the least bit bothered. She just pushed me away and told me to "*buzz off*."

One day while she milked a cow and I talked to her she told me that though she liked fatty meat it made her sick and she had eaten too much of it that day. The words were hardly out her mouth when the fat followed. Not that she made even a minor fuss about it; she kept right on milking. Though later of necessity I became immune to the sight and smell of people vomiting then it disgusted me.

Butts, No Ifs, Ends or Ands

Smoking, now considered the secular equivalent of a mortal sin, a generation or so ago was not perceived as a social sin at all not even one of the venial variety. Only when one sees movies of that era are we reminded of just how ubiquitous smoking was. Non-smokers were a minority and by many considered a bit odd and prissy.

Despite being doctors both our parents smoked as did most of their brothers and sisters. When it became clear smoking and lung cancer were connected most if not all gave it up without much apparent difficulty. None that I know of died of lung cancer.

Upstairs my Aunts and Miss Kenny disposed of their cigarette ends ('butts' downstairs), into ashtrays or directly into the fire place. In winter these disappeared in the fire each evening. In summer they collected in the now fireless fireplace until cleaned out by the maid. Since most cigarettes were unfiltered, the butts/ends were unsmoked tobacco.

Downstairs the cheapest variety of cigarettes, Will's Woodbines, were the choice. The immutable class rules ordained Wills therefore could not be smoked upstairs. There the choices were Players, State Express 555, (my parents' choice) filtered du Maurier or Sweet Afton, the last with a quote from Robbie Burns on the package: '*By yon banks and by yon bonnie braes, Sweet Afton, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise*.'

Often desperate for a smoke and at times unable to afford a pack of five Woodbines, on finding out about this cornucopia of wasted tobacco Taid Murphy persuaded us to collect the butts for him and this we did. These he relit and smoked them down to a point where they singed his calloused finger tips or rolled the contents of a few butts into new cigarettes.

Children tend to copy adults so we tried smoking too; the place chosen was the then largely unused back kitchen. This

had been the old kitchen of what had once been a single storied two roomed cottage. When the much larger L-shaped Willowbrook House was built or rebuilt in the early nineteenth century, the cottage was incorporated into the new building and the kitchen left virtually unchanged, became part of the ground (first in North America) floor of the smaller wing of the rebuilt house. The original windows of the cottage were still in place, no longer facing the yard but into a passage that led from the kitchen via scullery to the yard door.

Though little used in our time in the late 1920s or 30s Jer Casey, a Willowbrook farm labourer, his wife and several children all lived in that dark low-ceilinged back kitchen for some time maybe even a few years. Somehow, while living there they either must have scrimped and saved enough or got some gift or small inheritance, to buy a rocky poor quality piece of land not far away. There, with the use of a horse, a hand held sledge hammer and fires that cracked some of the rocks, over many years Jer turned the place into a productive farm. His endurance and capacity for hard labour must have been beyond prodigious.

Later, some of his children emigrated to the USA. One of his daughters worked for the Rockefeller family in New York. She seems to have made a good impression as they paid for and attended her wedding. Not bad for a girl whose early years were spent in the dark, dingy, dank and overcrowded old back kitchen of Willowbrook.

This, by our time little used room, was the place we cutely enough chose to experiment with smoking, initially using corrugated cardboard. In due course it occurred to us if the men could smoke the Aunts' cigarette butts so could we. The corrugated cardboard was forgotten. It so happened around the time, our parents came from London for one of their almost annual visits and brought us small wooden pipes as presents presumably to blow bubbles or to pretend to smoke.

Since many older men then smoked pipes now that we had some, we decided to try them out using some of the butt end

tobacco we had obtained from the grate in our usual place, the back kitchen.

I can't remember how many times we had done this, it certainly wasn't many when who should walk in on our smoking party but our mother. I don't expect she was any less surprised to see us puffing away on our pipes, than we were to see her. There were no repercussions except I think the secret butt smuggling cartel was revealed, putting an end to Taid's supply of, sort of, contraband tobacco.

When Cousin Des Kelly lived in Willowbrook during the 1930s our very proper mutual grandmother was still alive and the Caseys spoken of above occupied the back kitchen. A single boy, Des inevitably became friends with some of the Casey children, in particular Paddy, a boy about his age.

One day playing together out the yard, Paddy said he would show Des a trick and lying down on his back peed up in the air. Greatly taken with this 'trick' and finding Grandma taking the sun in the front garden Des excitedly told her he had something to show her and proceeded to perform Paddy Casey's 'trick.' Grandma, a true Victorian, was the opposite of amused.

‘Bridgeen’

My father (born 1896) told me when he was a boy tramps were common wandering the country roads of County Waterford. A number of these were regular irregular callers to Aglish. He recalled only one in any detail, a former school teacher ruined it seemed by ‘the demon drink.’

Like others of his kind, out of necessity he sought to ingratiate himself with his hosts though in a quite different way from the others. Instead of grovelling and begging like most, in fine, confident, stentorian tones, he declaimed grandiloquently on the well known generosity and good character of his hosts, the comeliness of their children, the beauty of their house, the fertility of their land, the fine fettle of their cattle, the speed and strength of their horses and so on and so forth. His oratory made a lifelong impression my father.

Forty years later fifty kilometres or so away in County Cork, tramps were probably rarer but had not disappeared. As in the case of my father, the only one to make the same type of impression on me did so for not entirely dissimilar reasons.

‘Bridgeen,’ probably a residual paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of persecution, had either managed to avoid incarceration in the large prison-like forbidding looking primitive county lunatic asylum on the outskirts of Cork city – known universally as ‘The Big House – or had escaped or was discharged, probably the former.

Always dressed in rags and impressively dirty, her origins, age or surname we never knew. Due to the homeless life she lived she must often have been cold, wet and hungry. Consequently her appearance and her age most likely made a poor match. Whatever the cause to us she looked ancient.

Like the visits to Aglish of the ex-teacher, ‘Bridgeen’s visits to Willowbrook were regular irregularities. They too had enough of an oratorical flourish to make them as memorable to

me as those of the drink reduced teacher were to my father. In her case though, they took a distinctly different tenor.

When she arrived Bridgeen would march into the kitchen and, regardless of those present (or even in their absence) put a kettle on the hob – in Willowbrook there were two always ready for use on the upper surface of the anthracite burning, always alight AGA – and make herself a cup of tea, cut herself a slice of bread, adding butter and jam or whatever she could find around the kitchen while at the same time she denounced in loud and lurid terms her most recent host or hostess whoever they might have been.

These formulaic denouncements always began with: "*they are a-a-a-l-l red mad over at …*" Compliments were non-existent. When she moved on to her next port of call presumably she said the same about my aunts, the maid, us or whoever else she had come across in Willowbrook. She may have done some denouncing too when alone but who knows? After such a visit months might pass before she appeared again.

She got off with such behaviour for a variety of reasons. She was clearly deranged, her bark worse than her bite and people felt sorry for her. She usually got a cup of tea and cut of bread and butter even in the poorest kitchens. There were other factors.

Country people were more than a bit afraid of her and her like for a mixture of reasons, primitive and practical. Some individuals or even families were reputed to have 'the evil eye,' or the power to put a curse on a person, what the old Gaelic speaking Cape Breton Highlanders called a buidsheach. Such suspected powers still stirred enough unease to give those suspected of possessing them a certain sinister cachet. Most people were reluctant to cross her and her like and they got off with behaviour not tolerated in others.

In former times when the dictums of the Dominicans priests Frs. Sprenger and Kramer authors of 'Maleus Malifacarum' (Hammer of witches) and others held sway in many parts of Christendom though that was not the case in Ireland, 'Bridgeen' would have stood a likely chance of being thrown in a river or

burnt by the officers of the Inquisition or merely for the edification of a passing Bishop or other Church dignitary.

There were also practical reasons for this degree of tolerance for these ladies and gentlemen of the road. Their sometimes ambivalent or frankly unwilling farmer-hosts were aware that if maltreated or displeased, tramps could all too easily even the score. A farm gate onto a road out of sight of the house deliberately left open might not be noticed for days allowing valuable stock to wander off, get lost, stolen or hurt. Or a match thrown into a haybarn or a rick of straw and a winter's feed or bedding go up in smoke, a disaster for a farmer. 'A cup o' tay' with a 'cut of bread, buther an' jam' and a rest before the kitchen fire was an inexpensive form of insurance and of course their gossip and stories were always welcome.

One of 'Bridgeen's pet peeves at Willowbrook was the sight of us running around outside bare footed. We always 'threw off the shoes' in spring and continued shoeless until autumn. Later our English schoolmates would be amazed at our ability to run at full speed on gravel with bare feet.

On one of her visits as she headed up the elegant, tree lined avenue towards the house 'Bridgeen' found us beside the avenue bare footed making some kind of shapes, castles perhaps with half dried cow dung, oddly enough the only time we ever did such a thing. When she got to the house she expressed outrage to our Aunts and Miss Kenny not about our building material but with the fact that we were not wearing as she put it: "*some class of ould shluppers*" (any kind of footwear).

In her view not only were we being unnecessarily exposed to the danger of cuts and thorns in our feet – a frequent enough happening – more importantly we were sullying the good name and social standing of the Pomeroys.

In her mind bare footedness and poverty were if not twins, close relatives. The children of the poor went bare foot for lack of choice. The Pomeroys, to her people of untold riches, had a choice and to ape the poor was to humiliate them – an affront to her view of the world. No doubt at her next port of call this was added to her other criticisms.

Towards the end of WWII in 1944 or '45 the widow of Bernard my mother's oldest, disgraced never mentioned brother died. This left their three teenage daughters homeless and probably more or less penniless. The eldest dark haired good looking Mary was about seventeen, her younger red haired sisters maybe sixteen and fourteen were not. By the time these three descended on Willowbrook, older brother Dick was a boarder at Presentation College, Bray, Co. Dublin. Except during his school holidays Nick and I were on our own.

I have one clear memory related to the imminent arrival of these three female cousins. The day before, the two of us, all of seven or eight years, standing in the avenue not far below the house, solemnly shaking hands and commiserating with each other over what we saw as the invasion of our space; the end of the good old days of our freedom. In practice my feelings were a good deal more ambivalent. Any company even girls were better than none.

But as the Marquis de Rochefoucauld put it, things never turn out quite so good or quite as bad as you think they will. The age differentials were so great, the poor girls so quiet, subdued and I suppose desolated and isolated, they impinged little on our lives. Indeed I can hardly remember their time in Willowbrook. Mary's life did impinge briefly on mine a decade or so later.

Aunt Margaret regularly went to the Millstreet market on Friday afternoons in the pony and trap. On one such occasion some time later when Mary was enjoying an afternoon in the house by herself and happened to be in the kitchen Bridgeen walked in as usual unannounced and as imperious as always. Paying no attention to the terrified Mary she put a kettle on the AGA and as usual helped herself to bread, butter and 'tay' while, in what Mary interpreted as a highly aggressive manner, equally as usual, she denounced the poor quality of the hospitality at the previous house she had honoured with her ragged presence and par for the course excoriated the characters of her recent host or hostess or both.

Since Bridgeen's visits were rare no one had thought of warning Mary or her sisters of this possibility, nor the fact that she was quite harmless. By the time Aunt Margaret arrived back from the town poor Mary was almost distraught.

Mary had another strange experience when alone in Willowbrook. Berty O'Shea a next door neighbour kept a bull. These days, bulls are selectively bred to father ever larger, barely mobile masses of saleable raw beef or cows that produce rivers of milk. Breeding was far more haphazard back then and bulls tended to be bonier, rangier, more athletic and maybe more libidinous.

Given the time it took to milk cows by hand – no milking machines in those days – herds were tiny compared to to-day; Aunt Margaret's herd of a dozen milking cows was I believe the largest in the immediate vicinity. This being the case no local farmer had enough cows to keep a young bull's urge fully satisfied. If the traditional stone and earth ditches between Willowbrook and Berty Shea's farm were adequate to keep their mutual cows, horses and other livestock on home territory, this was not always the case when one of Berty's young bulls got a whiff of the sweet ambrosia of one of my Aunt's cows in season.

Such must have been the case that day for the bull came a-visiting and presumably having done his honourable self sacrificing duty by the cow or cows in immediate need, (in the usual gallant, generous male way) had rambled off, I suppose to try to get home. Lacking orienteering skills or for some other bullish reason, it finished up outside the Willowbrook hall door and attracted by the polished, brass door knocker, as bulls tend to be by bright colours such as the bright red cape of the bull fighter, Berty's bull must have hooked a horn under the knocker or maybe sniffing it managed to lift it and letting it fall inadvertently knocked on the door. Mary as it happened, again alone, politely answered the knock. When she opened the door it was unclear who or which was more startled.

One winter's day 'Bridgeen' was I heard found dead in the back seat of an abandoned car. She had apparently died of cold and starvation.

Sole to Soul

When my son Finn was about three years old we went together to the London Zoo. At one point we found ourselves in front of the tiger cage where, for a change, the tiger was not asleep in a corner as is the usual case with big cats in zoos, but pacing back and forth growling mere feet from us; lithe, large, loose, hundreds of pounds of muscular, predatory ferocity, the biggest perhaps most deadly pussy cat of them all. It was beyond intimidating, a mighty animal. Even for an adult it was hard not to be impressed and I thought Finn, perched up on my shoulders would be even more impressed. Instead, ignoring it he pointed to a corner of the cage and said: "*Look Dad; old tyres*." A child's view of what is or is not significant is different.

If two men were sufficient to do the farm work most of the time at Willowbrook this was not so all the time. Some seasonal work, saving the hay, threshing the grain and the like, required extra hands and occasionally extra horses.

Like other farmers Aunt Margaret dealt with these recurring necessities by mutual neighbourly exchanges of labour. The currency of this exchange was not cash but work time, a half a day here, a day there with sometimes a horse-and-cart or more rarely, some other implement thrown in.

Though she never said so, I believe Aunt Margaret sensibly kept a careful inventory of those to whom and by whom she owed or was owed work time. I am sure she honoured her obligations carefully and I would think largely got the same in return; neighbours' mutual dependence insured the system worked reasonably well. Exchange labour, yes; give, no.

If she had been completely on her own it might well have occurred to some neighbours to take advantage of her. I doubt if this happened. The none too distant presence of her two influential brothers would have acted as a powerful deterrent. Uncle Nick, a feisty character with influence would not have

been a man to cross. Not to mind Uncle Jerome, the only vetinarian for miles around. For a farmer to get on the outs with him was beyond unwise. Not surprisingly then l doubt if any of the exclusively male local farmers tried to push her around or put one over on her.

Consequently, particularly in summer and autumn, there were not infrequent comings and goings of men to fulfill these mutual work obligations. When they came to Willowbrook inevitably we came in contact with them and out of necessity needed some way of fitting them into our childish pantheon. For whatever reason, we chose to judge their place in this pantheon by the soles of their boots or more specifically not so much the soles themselves but what was nailed to them.

In those days not only were the upper parts of boots and shoes made of leather so were the soles. Rubber boots ('Wellingtons') did exist but for whatever reason were not that common; maybe too expensive, not readily available or of poor quality. Maybe just unfashionable, vanity and conformity are powerful forces. For whatever reason farmers and farm labourers mostly wore leather boots with leather soles.

Leather though ideal for the upper parts of boot or shoe has distinct limitations for the sole. It grips the surface poorly, softens when wet and wears out too quickly. Hobnails were used to make up for these deficiencies. It was the size, type, number and layout of these that became our equivalent of the Rorschach test.

The most admired, the Porsche of boot soles, contained two complete lines of new or fairly new hobnails around the periphery plus two or more straight lines up the middle. The whole completed by a steel heel tip; no hobnails for the heel no, no, no, that was quite déclassé; the metal tip for the heel was the thing. A full set of hobnails plus a metal tip and the wearer was A OK, a real man; his soles the window to his soul…that's awful.

Since the normal sole-of-a-boot view of the world is mostly looking down very closely at the ground, checking out a visiting

man's boot soles was not always easy. They were around only for a day or two at most and rarely took their boots off. Opportunities for taking a look did occasionally arise such as when one climbed a ladder or sat down for a rest or had the standard and much appreciated afternoon tea in the fields. I can't remember any specific successes in our sole spotting efforts but surely there must have been some.

Each boot fully loaded with its complement of hobnails and steel tips must have weighed several pounds and no doubt at least partially accounted for the slow measured tread of many farming men. Apart from not having the same view of the importance of the working men's soles or souls for that matter, Aunt Van had a different explanation for this characteristic gait and for protruding ears and other physical characteristics. Both were among the many physical stigmata of the lower classes.

A local man, Jerry Long, with author (in middle) and his brothers

'To everything there is a Season' (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

In to-day's world – western variety anyway – most of us spend our waking lives in climate controlled spaces, stationary or moving, eyes glued to screens or windshields largely immune and unaware of much that goes on out there beyond our man-made cages. Occasionally nature throws a tantrum and does some damage. We briefly take notice, complain, seek someone or some organisation or agency – preferably government – to blame for the ill effects and continue as per usual until the next one.

Despite this common attitude to the natural order and the scientific agricultural improvements of the last half century or so farmers still cannot ignore nature in this myopic way. Natural phenomena, weather, climate, soil and season, still have their say.

Not that these are the only or even the major forces having an impact on farming, so do politics, science, economics and other things. This was acutely so in the late thirties as Europe moved towards war again.

Realising one of the results of war would be the difficulty of having on hand sufficient food for the people the Irish government of the day introduced legislation to control food production. Farmers were mandated to sow a certain percentage of their land (7% I think) to grain crops irrespective of the considerable climate variations in different parts of the country or of land quality that varies even more.

The farmland of much of North West Co. Cork is poor, rainfall one of the highest in a rain abundant country and average summer temperatures low for grain crops, particularly wheat but the mandated percentage still had to be grown. For all its faults the policy seems to have worked. If there was starvation or something too close to it for comfort, during WWII the cause

was human error, corruption, judgment or plain cruelty institutional or personal, not lack of food.

In the 1940s in the western world, as it still is in much of the rest of the world to-day, the effects of natural phenomena were much greater and the ability of farmers to deal with them much less than now. To-day a few people using modern machinery can do an amount of work in a fixed time that was impossible then without an army of horses and helpers.

In winter the day had a regular routine. As spring arrived, that changed. Ploughing, harrowing, manuring, and sowing, the necessary preliminary steps towards crop production began.

One major spring activity not related to food production was the start of the turf (peat) production process. Even if substitutes such as wood and later anthracite coal were available at a price – too high for many- turf (peat) was still the pre-eminent fuel used for cooking and warmth.

As with neighbouring farms, Willowbrook was virtually without bog land. Under ancient 'rights of turbary' the Pomeroys and their neighbours obtained turf from a bog some 2-3 km. away. 'Turbary' from the Latin turbaria then 'turbierre,' French for bog. Rights of turbary probably got to Ireland via Strongbow and his Norman followers in the twelfth century. As with so many other English nouns such as mutton, beef and pork and the like, turbary is one of the bricks in a largely unnoticed verbal monument to the French speaking Norman conquerors of England in 1066.

The initial step, involved cutting the turf out of the bog in oblong roughly brick-like pieces ('sods') using a narrow, square ended, two sided, spade called a 'shlaun' used only usefully for this purpose.

When newly cut, turf is a dark brown to black, saturated substance, the consistency of fibrous putty, far too wet to use for fuel. To reach this state it had to be dried, even in good years a drawn out, labour intensive business.

The first step in the drying process was to leave the newly cut sods on the uncut bog surface until partially dry and hardened

enough to be 'footed.' This consisted of standing each sod on one end leaning against a few others. When dry the turf was loaded onto carts and taken to the edge of the bog and there built into one or two large stacks ('clamps') sometimes covered in rushes.

The turf remained in the clamps until 'drawn in' to the turf shed near the house by horse and cart later. The carts were fitted with special removable high latticed sides to produce a 'crib' to enable a much larger quantity to be transported per load. This was a slow process as the distance to the bog was considerable.

As with much other seasonal and weather bound work, most of those with rights of turbary cut their turf at about the same time in spring. Bar the cutting, much of the other work was done by women and even children such that the bog became a rare annual communal gender and age mixed occasion.

With spring in the air, and young men and women's hearts too, lightly turning to love this rare enough occasion for social promiscuity must at times have bordered on the sexual variety, become one of those "*dangerous occasions of scene* (sin)" routinely damned with such orgiastic fervour from the pulpit on Sundays. Not that the bog offered anything like an ideal place for a bit of hanky panky. The surface was rough, often more than merely damp and offered virtually no cover as the acidic bog provided poor soil for almost anything to grow to any height, a lot less than ideal for anything even approaching a bout of surreptitious outdoor What Ho, not that I was aware of or interested in this possibility at that age. It was the opposite with the lunches the men took to the bog each day in a tuck box sized wooden container. They made my mouth water.

Despite what was, by latter day criteria, an almost criminal level of laxity of vigilance kept over our outdoor activities, we felt our Aunts were far too vigilant compared to the parents of most country children. We were not allowed to join those on the bog unaccompanied by one of them. Even if the reason given was to stop us from missing our 'lessons' which made sense, the more important unstated one was surely to prevent

us fraternising with the lower orders.

We did sometimes see the bog work in full spate. A few times the weather being fine our Aunts walked there and we went with them. On such occasions it was impossible not to be aware of the barrier created by the upstairs portion of our lives their presence reflected. In their absence we could at least pretend no such barrier existed. In their presence our outsider 'other' status became impossible to ignore.

Calving, another largely spring activity, stretched into the summer. Cows did not come into season at the same time so their trysts with the bull (no 'bull-in-the bowler' then) were spread out over weeks or months as consequently was calving. Among other things this stretched out the milking season thereby making this twice daily, time consuming task more manageable during the busy summer season. Both men and the maid took part in milking. Other than assisting Aunt Margaret with the fowl this was the latter's only regular daily farmyard duty. Though a solid producer of revenue for most of the year, milking remained a major daily consumer of work time.

Like other ruminants, immediately after calving, cows have a fierce desire to eat the afterbirth (placenta), 'lavings' in local parlance. Since most cows were brought into the cow-house to calve and, as when milked, loosely chained by the neck to a dividing wall, this desire went unsatisfied as they could not get to it and placentas were removed. The reason given was that the cow might choke on it.

Sometimes cows calved out in the fields and presumably then they satisfied that urge and that I remember none died so this hypothesis hardly held water.

There must have been superstitious beliefs associated with this discarded temporary organ for the remains of old blackened, dried, hardened placentas (lavings) were draped over the rafters of the cowsheds at Willowbrook and elsewhere.

If a calving cow had difficulty expelling her calf one of the men gave her assistance by grabbing one of the half-born calf's protruding front legs and pulling. Though these were mostly

strong men the calves subsequently didn't seem to show any major untoward after-effects other than a limp for a few days. What a way to start life, having your leg pulled.

Years later, when I was a young doctor in the Rotunda Maternity Hospital in Dublin, the food of the resident staff and presumably the patients, was dire. A frequent lunch item was a gruesome version of minced meat. Given there was a constant supply of placentas in that setting, it was sardonically rumoured these were the source of the minced meat.

Though I have no memory of anything particularly exciting happening at Willowbrook to a calving cow, it can and presumably happened. And as cows were a valuable asset, the loss of one and/or a calf to a farmer who had only 3 or 4 was a substantial blow. This being the case how a vetinarian handled such complications could make or break a reputation, illustrated by a conversation overheard among a group of farmers discussing the merits of a particular vet.

One made disparaging comments about the length of time he had taken to get his degree. Another countered that with: "*But he is a great man at the arse of a* (calving) *cow*," an argument that closed the debate.

Once the turf was cut and footed and the ploughing, harrowing and sewing done, the next major seasonably mandated job was the first step in the process of 'saving' the hay i.e., getting it cut, dried and into the haybarn. Even in a fine summer this required a lot of work greatly increased if the summer was wet.

The hay was cut using a 'mowing' machine pulled by two horses side by side; generally it was considered too hard for a single horse. Abandoned, badly rusted mowing machines or parts of them are still a common site on old often abandoned farms in Nova Scotia. Cutting was the easy part; getting the hay dry in the rain bedevilled, cool, damp climate of Co. Cork was a different matter. The process involved a series of time honoured steps.

A day or so after cutting the hay was 'tossed' with a hand

held, two pronged pike or if available a horse drawn hay 'tosser.' Newly cut hay is still dried with similar far larger tractor drawn hay 'tossers.'

A day or two later, the now drier hay was put into 'crowers' ('ow' as in 'crowd') small loose heaps again using a two pronged pike. The length of time it remained in crowers was weather dependent. When considered suitably dry the hay was built into haycocks, the last stage before being 'drawn in' to the hay barn.

Haycocks were carefully built heaps the shape of half an egg, 10 to 12 feet in diameter at the base and roughly 8 to 10 feet high.

Spread in crowers across the field the first step necessary to gather the hay together to build the haycocks was to use a horse drawn wheel rake to move the crowers into long straight heaps. The rusted remains of wheel rakes are also still a common sight in rural Nova Scotia. These long heaps were then brought to the spot where the haycock was to be built with a horse drawn 'tumbling paddy.'

In the afternoons on such summer hay making days the maid or Aunt Margaret or even Miss Kenny brought a basket with tea, bread, butter and jam to workers in the fields. The arrival of the tea was the signal to down tools, take a seat on the ground and relax leaning against a newly made hay cock, with 'a sop o' hay' to sit on. The talk flowed, the dogs like their wolfish ancestors around human encampments for millennia, hung around looking for scraps. The horse left alone nearby still harnessed to wheel rake or tumbling paddy, took advantage of the stoppage to graze despite the awkward descent of the loose collar on its neck and the occasional shout of "*hould up*!" from one of the men. Never was rest so appreciated or such simple fare taste so delicious. Silage and more recently haylage unknown at that time would surely have solved many of the difficulties of hay making in so wet a climate.

Provided the weather was not too wet, once in cocks the hay was safe. However in riverside fields in a year with severe flooding, haycocks occasionally got carried away in a flood.

Old Mrs. Ford, my Aunts' charwoman and general factotum, describing such a sight said: "*They* (the cocks of hay) *were going down the ruvver* (river) *like shtaymers* (steamers)."

Getting the hay into the barn, the last major job of the hay season, could be done in two different ways. One involved piking the hay from the hay cocks onto the standard two wheeled cart, carrying it to the barn and there piking it a second time from the cart into the open sided galvanised, steel roofed 'Dutch' barn. At this stage it was safe – saved – for the winter unless there was a rare major calamity of some such as fire, storm or roof collapse.

The other more common way of drawing in the hay to the barn involved the use of a special large, flat, wagon (a 'float' in Co. Cork, a 'buggy' in Co. Waterford). Whereas other farm carts had large diameter, narrow, metal rimmed wooden wheels at the sides of the cart, floats/buggies had small wide steel wheels underneath. The rear end of the floor of this flat wooden cart could be lowered to the ground by tripping a lever and lifting the front end up. In this position the horse was commanded to back ('heck up') and push that rear edge under the bottom of the haycock with enough force to drive it in far enough to keep the float in position when the horse stopped pushing back.

From this position with a lever system of a pulley and two ropes, the operator dragged the haycock onto the flat surface of the float. During this process the ratcheted handles (the levers) made a sound so characteristic that if heard to-day I would still recognise it immediately. Once the centre of balance of the haycock was beyond the middle of the float the front tipped down again and locked into place. A few more short pulls with one of the handles and it was secure.

Once the hay cock was on the 'float', the horse pulled it to the hay barn, hard work for horses. Using a float meant the hay needed to be piked only once, from the float into the barn.

The hot dusty work under the galvanised steel roof was often given to boys armed with broken short handled pikes if they were available, their size making it easier to work in that con-

fined space. Hard work that it was we liked to do this. It meant we became a part of the action and we hoped earned the esteem of the men. Whether it did or not no doubt they were only too glad to let us do it. They had no desire to be confined up there under the metal roof in the heat and dust.

The second major later summer task was harvesting the mandated crops of wheat, oats and barley.

Until the advent of the 'reaper and binder' grain crops were cut primarily with a (hay) mowing machine and bound into sheaves by hand. If flattened ('lodged') by rain, a scythe had to be used. Binding was slow, labour intensive, back breaking, often prickly work – there were no herbicides and no scarcity of thistles – requiring as many hands as could be obtained including women and children if they were available.

Although my paternal grandfather in Co. Waterford had owned one since I believe 1902 the use of the reaper-and-binder had not spread the mere 70 kilometres or so west to North Cork until 1945 or thereabouts. The binder removed the slow, thorny, drudgery of hand binding a major advance in more ways than one. As with all such advances there was a price. It drove a nail into the coffin of the old communal ways of harvesting and all the beneficial, enjoyable, social activities that went with them.

Aunt Margaret was the first, at least in the immediate area, to try out a binder. On that occasion half the farmers in the parish seemed to be there, many with their horses as she had only the two and the binder needed three. Sorting out which three horses were best for the job involved the usual generous quota of talk, wit and banter, not to mind strong opinions on the merits and demerits of each horse. Presumably they got the binder going though I have no memory of seeing it in action that day.

Once bound into sheaves the grain was immediately stooked ('sshtu-wickt') and given an opportunity to dry for a week or longer if required. If well dried it was sometimes put into stacks (essentially two storied stooks) where it was better protected from the rain and could dry more.

When dry, with help from the neighbours once again, the unthreshed sheaves of grain were loaded onto carts and carried to the 'haggart' and built into two ricks five or six metres high and just far enough apart to fit the threshing machine ('mill' in other parts of the country – see Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Threshing Morning') between them. But that process requires a separate chapter.

After the threshing season Autumnal work took over, digging potatoes and putting them into 'pits,' pulling and snagging mangles and turnips ('snagging' is cutting off the roots and stems with a heavy knife or cleaver – I still have the scar on my left index finger from snagging turnips over 65 years ago).

Potato 'pits' were dug out, shallow, oblong hollows in the ground about a foot deep and three wide and as long as was necessary, nine to twelve feet or more if required. Into this shallow straw lined pit, potatoes were piled in a conical heap a few feet high. These were then covered with straw and then with earth and scrows (sods) to a depth of about six inches (20 cm.). In these the potatoes remained in remarkably good condition, though rats could and sometimes did do damage.

By the time these and the other lesser tasks were done the winter rhythm of feeding animals, milking cows, taking the milk to the creamery etc., took over and continued until spring when the cycle started all over again as it has done on farms in one form or another since hunters became farmers.

First Confession & Communion

The Catholic Church held though a child could be naughty it could not be immoral until it reached '*the age of the use of reason*' (about seven) as he or she was incapable of knowing right from wrong and therefore could not commit sin. Once the individual had reached that age this was no longer the case. Such a child thereafter was capable of committing sin even of mortal severity and unless forgiven by a priest in confession, be condemned to hell for all eternity. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget have confirmed this long held Church belief that something does change in a child's psyche at that approximate age.

Long before this age our Aunts, Miss Kenny and the entire culture, repeatedly impressed on us the necessity of escaping this fate and co-incidentally the possibility of the opposite of getting to heaven by being good even if via purgatory, but that did not receive anything like the same emphasis. In practice this meant not being naughty, going to mass on Sunday and saying our prayers. We were made aware when we reached that age we would have to go to confession for the first time and next day, our soul purged, have our first communion.

I have a quite clear memory of a circumstance that showed (quite suddenly) I had reached this stage in my mental development. Whether this was shortly before or after my first confession I don't know though it was I believe thereabouts. For a short while a dark haired, swarthy, menacing looking man came intermittently to work at Willowbrook; probably a neighbour's labourer working off days of work owed to Aunt Margaret.

If we happened to be around when he was with Aunt Margaret's men and or maid, for their entertainment he would take out his penknife, open the blade and feeling the edge with his thumb as if to make sure it was sharp, glare balefully at us

and say: "*I'm mad for blood to-day*." All too clearly he got a buzz out of frightening children and in my case succeeded. Then one day I realised this was nonsense. He simply couldn't do any such thing. From then on I ceased to be afraid of him.

In Ireland religious instruction was doled out through the state's denominational school systems, Protestant and Catholic variations. For the latter via the State's Catholic Church run school system the first confession/first communion cycle was usually done en masse on one day each year. However neither Nick nor I went to school. Tutored at home, when my time came other arrangements had to be made. In my case I was to make my first confession in Millstreet on a Saturday and receive my first communion next day in Killarney twenty miles away.

I have absolutely no memory of that first confession itself or of the sins I produced to confess or of my journey through Millstreet to the cavernous church at the other end of the town. I walked there probably with Aunt Van, certainly with my brothers and was I suppose, appropriately nervous facing a priest in a confessional for the first time.

It must have been in summer during a stretch of fine weather for the day was warm and the streets of Millstreet dry. If Aunt Van accompanied my brothers and me to the church, she didn't stay. She went back up the town presumably to her dental surgery (office) to see patients where we were to join her after I had made that first confession.

Since neither Nick nor I had attended school, we had not had an opportunity to make outside friends. Dick however had done both. His best friend's name was Noelly Duggan who lived with his mother and father or maybe just widowed mother and I think his nine or ten siblings, in a public house (bar) near what was called 'the Bridge' in the centre of the town. Nick and I had met him occasionally when he came to Willowbrook though he had not been there for some time. In Aunt Van's view, he was common. She banned him from visiting again.

After I had made that first confession as planned, we set off towards Aunt Van's surgery. It so happened en route we came

across Noelly and a few of his brothers and probably other boys playing in the street outside the family bar. Delighted to see him again, elated after getting that intimidating first confession behind me and starved of other children to play with, I was more than willing to join them. My brothers were not exactly unwilling either. Other children joined in and in no time we were tearing around having a great old time pelting each other with nuggets of dried horse manure and other gutter garbage while no doubt making a glorious racket and having such a great time, our rendezvous with Aunt Van slipped our minds.

When we failed to appear at her surgery naturally Aunt Van headed down the town to find us. Totally engaged in the battle with the other kids we failed to notice her approach. We only became aware something was wrong when our newly acquired playmates took off. They had spotted her before we had and wisely vamoosed leaving us to face her, isolated, deserted and alone.

She was all too clearly furious at finding us *'making a show of yourselves*' and by direct association her, in front of the townies, in her view irredeemably 'common' to a man, woman, child and dog. Worse, not just playing in the gutters with any town children but specifically with the banned Noelly and his cohort of siblings and friends.

My crime of course was worse for not only was I so recently shriven for the first time, lacking only communion to be in a heaven-ready State of Grace, of more practical significance, I was in my best Sunday-going-to-mass clothes and therefore, doubly on my best behaviour. To make matters worse it had been made all too clear to us Noelly was persona non grata at Willowbrook and playing with him, his brothers and/or friends anywhere, anytime verboten, doing so on the streets of the town, verboten in diamonds not to mind spades.

Our trudge home is still etched in my engrams. The three of us, walking silently behind an equally silent, seething Aunt Van pushing her bike, her firm muscular buttocks and back radiating a toxic cocktail of fury, disappointment, mortification and disapproval.

Though my brothers were aware they had crossed the line and like me feared some terrible retribution unlike me, they did not have to worry that they may have committed a mortal sin and thereby be in danger of going to hell for all eternity if I went to communion next day.

There was no such retribution, no punishment, not even a telling off. The episode was never mentioned again – ever – and I concluded from this a trip to hell was unlikely if I received communion next day. This greatly relieved me though I was puzzled. It was hard to believe the episode had been entirely forgotten that quickly.

Whatever her private conclusions, Aunt Van was clearly cognisant of the fact that I was in the middle of my first confession/first communion combo and even if this public faux pas of mine had prematurely taken the gloss off the occasion, for the sake of appearances and also no doubt for the ease of mind of our distant, very Catholic parents, the second part of the show, my first communion had to go on. Next day en famille we headed to Killarney.

They must have got the local taxi driver to take us for the Aunts did not have a car and by car we went. Certainly Uncle Jerome the vet didn't take us though, like the priest, the doctor and presumably the taxi owner he was allowed a ration of scarce petrol. It was hardly surprising; fuel of any kind was so scarce. This was 1943 and from Belfast to Moscow and beyond, WW2 was raging in all its terrible ferocity.

There were probably a number of reasons I was taken to Killarney for my first communion and not to Millstreet. The one I was given was that I was to have the special privilege of receiving the host for the first time from the hands of Fr. Francis, a Franciscan friar, a friend of Miss Kenny's who had visited Willowbrook a few times. He was the only visitor she ever had that I remember and the Aunts had taken to him. If not a full-time priest in Killarney he was to say mass there on that particular Sunday.

When it came to the time in the mass for my communion, it

had been arranged and I suppose Fr. Francis had announced it from the pulpit, that before anyone else went up to the altar rails, I was to go up alone to receive communion first and then return to my place before anyone else moved. It is not at all unlikely Aunt Margaret thought all this was a bit over the top but Aunt Van clearly didn't and as usual, got her way.

I hated the whole thing. We lived such reclusive lives I was utterly unprepared for this type of public performance particularly in a large, strange almost full church. I was heartily glad to get it over with and go back to Willowbrook and the presents I expected which, unlike at Christmas and birthdays, had the added value I would get them all and my brothers none.

I don't know where I got the conviction presents were part of the shtick. It was not the case. Bar a cross from Miss Kenny blessed by holy water from where I can't remember, I don't think there were any other presents or at least not of any consequence for they have left no trace. It is also possible the absence of presents was a punishment for my disastrous post-confessional behaviour in Millstreet though this was never stated and did not enter my mind at the time.

In brief the gratification and presents I had hoped to get from my entry into Catholic adulthood were a great disappointment. The only part of the whole thing that I recall with pleasure was that dried horse dung fight with the Duggan boys on Millstreet's main street. The rest was a bummer all around.

Threshing

"*Five pound and my daughter for the best man in the haggart*."

(A politically incorrect exhortation from an enthusiastic threshing machine owner/driver/operator heard by my late Uncle Matthew O'Brien at a threshing when he was a boy in the early nineteen hundreds.)

I have a photo taken around 1900 of a threshing in full spate in my paternal grandfather's haggart. The power unit, out of the picture is identifiable as a steam powered tractor. The drive belt is the giveaway.

By the 1940s such coal and wood burning steam driven monsters had disappeared from farmyards and roads other than the odd one neglected, rusting away and forgotten in the corner of a field or haggart. Quite different looking, less bulky, more efficient, lighter, diesel, paraffin (TVO/kerosene) or petrol (gas) powered tractors had replaced them.

In contrast threshing machines in appearance size and presumably mechanically, didn't seem to have changed much since the steam tractor age if that photo is anything to go by, for that machine looks much like those of the forties and fifties.

The Lords of the threshing, those annual farming Great Occasions, the central figures, the monarchs of all they surveyed, the masters of ceremonies, the captains on the bridge, the grand panjandrums, were the owner driver operators (ODOs) of those awe inspiring threshing machines and the stubby, plebeian, powerful, steel wheeled old Fordson tractors that not only hauled them from farm to farm but via a belt from a power take-off on the side of the engine drove those large, bellowing, mechanical contraptions to perform the task of separating the wheat (and the barley and the oats) from the chaff (and straw).

Due to the vagaries of weather, mechanical breakdowns and the like, even the most honest and reliable ODO could not accurately forecast his exact time of arrival at a particular farm.

Given this, when a farmer with his or her grain already drawn in and ready 'got an account' of a previously booked ODO plus his machinery heading towards if not to, his or her particular farm the progress of the ODO, not to mind the weather, was followed with an intense cocktail of anxiety, apprehension, expectation and excitement. As soon as it was clear the threshing man/machine combo was coming to a particular farm, the word spread and previously tapped men appeared, for a threshing needed a dozen or more helpers to keep it going full tilt.

Where it was known there would be plenty of food, bottles of stout, lemonade and apples help was easily got. Aunt Margaret provided all of these generously and got the help needed plus the usual added coterie of oddities; compromised by mental or physical disabilities – men considered a bit 'quare' - standard bit players at any good threshing.

In Aunt Margaret's case the ODO who had cornered the threshing market in that locality, was cheerful, stocky, Bill Twomey, stubby, enduring, indomitable like his old Fordson tractor, his false teeth, (courtesy of Aunt Van) when he grinned or laughed, a gleaming white interruption across his square, tanned, unshaven face. Bill wasn't just a pretty face though, he knew how to handle his machinery, a facility he demonstrated yearly at Willowbrook when he manoeuvred the large, awkward threshing machine through narrow gates and other hazards into position between the two ricks of sheaves already in position. To us he was the incarnation of the fabled '*giants that were in the world in them days*.'

He was quick enough with his tongue too and joined easily in the often caustic battles of words that were as much a part of the occasion as the bottles of stout and fizzy lemonade, the dust, the flying chaff, the apples, the to-ing and fro-ing of men, the constant throaty, guttural rumble of the paraffin burning tractor, and the rising and falling cadence of the threshing machine as it swallowed the cut sheaves fed into its voracious mouth located on the middle of its back, spewing out grain at one end, straw at the other and chaff underneath.

Bill Twomey's assistant, Cronin, was a quiet, morose, nondescript, little man. He didn't seem to do much and said less; the semi invisible yin to Bill's highly visible yang.

The different tasks at a threshing had a social ranking never discussed but somehow understood. It was not that this ranking was clearly defined or that it carried from one farm to another but on each farm each year the same men tended to do the same jobs.

The lowest of the low and the most miserable was clearing the constant flow of chaff from underneath the threshing machine where it accumulated with a fork.

In Willowbrook this job regularly devolved on poor 'quare' Con Duggan, a half crippled, deformed, possibly but possibly not, mentally retarded little man with a twisted body and face who lived with his sister at 'the cross.' It was rumoured her husband mistreated him. Poor Con was an object of almost universal derision. At best he was no Adonis, but after forking the chaff for a while, his ragged clothes were covered in chaff, barley beard, thistle and thorns. Some also stuck in his eyebrows, around his snotty nose and spittle flecked mouth, making him an even sorrier sight. Consequently the laughter when on one occasion, witty Morris Fitz passing by, cheerily asked: "*Were you at the dance last night Con*?" The thought of Con dancing at any time was ludicrous enough but the way he looked just then beyond ludicrous.

The next job up the scale from Con's was taking the bags of threshed grain from the back of the thresher to wherever the grain was to be stored. Boys and young lads mostly did this, putting the bags on their backs and then in Willowbrook hauling them up the external stone steps to the grain loft where they emptied them onto the previously swept floor before returning the empty bags to be refilled at the rear of the machine. In Willowbrook the self-appointed occasional comptroller of this job was Jack 'Maag' the poet.

Further up the social job order was that of 'piking' sheaves from the unthreshed ricks onto the threshing machine, a pivotal

job in as much as it controlled the speed with which the threshing proceeded. This job required adult strength and endurance as it had to be kept up nonstop as long as the threshing continued. Usually if enough men were available two took on this task.

Carrying the threshed straw on pikes from where it fell to the ground from its exit point high up on the end of the thresher to the men (usually four) who built the rick of threshed straw, did not so much delineate the social standing as the youth and strength of those who did it.

The job of building the threshed straw into ricks on the other hand was the opposite. That was for the older men, their physical strength not what it once was but their skill honed by experience. And skilled they were for without doing any measuring process that I ever saw, year after year they produced a rick or ricks – sometimes there were two – that took all the straw and no more and shaped at the top so the straw was maximally protected from the rain yet never blew or toppled over that I remember.

Another upper end job was cutting the binding of the sheaves before pushing them towards the man who fed them uncut and loosened into the threshing machine. The person 'cuttin' shaves' was at the mercy of the men who piked them onto the machine. The faster they worked the faster he had to work and since of necessity, the cutter did his job with a sharp knife the possibility of cutting the feeder's hand was considerable. On one occasion I did just that. The feeder was not pleased; not that I blame him.

Unequivocally the highest ranking job was feeding the machine. Not that it was difficult but the feeder had to be careful. The cut sheaf had to be spread out in the right way in midair with the grain bearing end pointed down and then dropped into the machine in a couple of seconds. There, intermeshed spiked rollers rotating at high speed caught the heads of the still unthreshed straw and jerked them into the machine's interior at high speed. If the feeder did not let go in time his arm was gone or worse.

Sometimes for a stint the ODO himself took on this job. If he did not or had to attend to his machinery, the host farmer or

some other mature man of standing and experience stood in for him. I don't think I had ever even aspired to this dizzying level of threshing social pre-eminence. Then at one of the last if not the last threshing at Willowbrook sometime in the middle fifties, I was given this job in deference no doubt to my standing as Aunt Margaret's nephew and the eldest available adult male of the house present at the time. For a couple of golden hours I stood in the metaphorical shoes of the great Bill Twomey. I too, even if briefly, felt I might be mistaken by some small boy for a '*giant in the world in them days*.'

Except for stops for food or a breakdown (rare enough) or a screen change when the type of grain being threshed changed from wheat to oats or to barley, the thresher was kept going full speed until the last sheaf was threshed.

A major part of the occasion was the meal when the work was done. Though everyone was fed at the same time, social divisions as ever were not forgotten. Food for the socially select few was served upstairs, downstairs in the kitchen for the rest.

The threshing of grain had been a festive occasion presumably since farming displaced hunting and gathering. If all went well it meant with a bit of luck, hunger was held at bay for another year. No wonder harvest festivals were such occasions of celebration.

And even if the tractor and threshing machine were steps on the way to the universal use of the combined harvester, a change that virtually eliminated the traditional social aspects of harvest time, in Co. Cork up into late fifties at least 'old time' threshings had not disappeared entirely and until that happened the festival mood was very much a part of the whole shtick. What I remember most vividly about those occasions was the individual and communal satisfaction that was part and parcel of the whole thing. I don't think I ever again got the same depth of satisfaction out of any event of whatever variety I have experienced since.

I have little doubt if I heard again in the distance, the rising and a falling cadence of a distant threshing machine on a fine, still, late summer evening I would surely weep.

The Moynihans

Most of the farms adjacent to Willowbrook were owned either by pairs of childless bachelors or married couples with few children almost all if not all of whom were girls; a relatively unusual state of affairs at that time in rural Ireland when couples either had none or lots of children.

The two pairs of childless bachelor brothers were the elegant 'Maags,' Jack and Jer and the Fitzes, Morris and Jer. Morris, the local wit, tied the knot later but hardly with unbounded enthusiasm if his answer to me was anything to go by. Shortly after he married, I asked him how married life agreed with him, expecting some non-committal but worthwhile response. He didn't disappoint: "*I dodged it for a long time*" he quipped.

He too I believe produced only two daughters to add to the total of the three produced by other neighbours, the Shea's one daughter and the Moynihan's two, Siobhan (Shivaun) and I can't remember her name, was married and lived in England. This low reproduction rate must have been something in the air, earth, fire, or water for the chances of a clandestine condom dealer plying his trade or of getting men's or women's reproductive tubes surgically tied in that area at that time ranged somewhere between winning of a major lottery first prize twice in a row and the Second Coming.

The Moynihans had a tiny sixteen acre farm facing east towards Willowbrook. On looking back one might wonder why people like them did not get into market gardening or some other specialised form of farming. The town of Millstreet was nearby and Cork City only fifty or so kilometres away and there was and I think still is, a functioning rail service with a railway station not far from Millstreet.

There were probably a number of reasons for this. The idea may simply have never crossed their minds. More likely it was a mixture of wartime regulations and Adam Smith's invisible

hand did not point clearly in that direction. To add to this, political stability in newly independent Ireland was still tenuous. If there was another round of violent political trouble a mixture of vegetable crops and animals would make a family more self-sufficient, safer and surer of not going hungry.

Living off such a tiny holding of poor land it might seem that the Moynihans had to be almost desperately poor and their lives hard. They certainly didn't seem poor to us and despite the fact that Mrs. Moynihan was half crippled with arthritis and could do little except help a bit with housework, neither Jack nor daughter Siobhan seemed prematurely worn away by hard work.

I am quite sure they didn't see themselves as poor nor did we get any indication they felt overworked or hard done by. They owned their own land, had a snug cottage, enough food for three square meals a day, clothes to wear, warm beds, turf for the fire, probably no debts and at the end of the day a bit left over. They were betoken to nobody, respected, independent and largely self-sufficient. Poor in things by to-day's standards but I don't think I am romanticising too much by saying they didn't have a bad life and had the good sense to appreciate it.

I am not suggesting there was not a price to pay or that it was shared equally. Jack almost certainly came off best. Landless, he had married into the farm thereby side-stepping the much harder labourer's lot. Siobhan maybe paid the highest price. She never married and between looking after her semi-invalid mother and helping her father around the yard never had the time or opportunity to marry or get a paying job if she wanted to and the independence that went with it. How much that rankled I don't know. She never struck me as unhappy and embittered but that does not say she wasn't.

Whenever we took a notion to drop in they had 'sweets' or 'biscuits' (cookies) for us and we always got 'the tay.' Before she poured the latter Siobhan would ask us with a smile if we wanted "*high tay or low tay*" and depending on our answer, poured the tea from a foot or so up in the air or just above the

cup. For years after I thought 'high tea' was just that, tea poured from a height. The first and last place I came across the term where it still meant something other than this, was in the Scottish Highlands in the late nineteen fifties. I still remember those unsweetened Highland oat cakes; they were the best.

Jack was a short, spare, wiry, tough, good natured, feisty, moustached man with a strong confident voice, always it seemed in a good mood. Then in his late forties or early fifties he was rarely without the de rigueur cap on the side of his head and more often than not, a metal capped pipe between his teeth as would have been the case with many older country men at that time. Out of doors, where he spent much if not most of his time, like most such pipe smokers, at regular intervals he would squirt a dollop of spit between pursed lips onto the ground a couple of metres in front of him, a habit we much admired and practised – out of sight of Miss Kenny and the aunts of course.

If by latter day standards he was not particularly kind to animals he had a way with them. At milking time each day if we looked across the valley, we would see his black and white sheep dog Billy on its own, go down through their few small fields, and gently but firmly gather their four or five milking cows together and drive them home to be milked. Apart from teaching it to herd cows and sheep Jack had taught Billy a few tricks. He would for instance point at one of us and tell Billy to bark at them; Billy promptly did.

Jack, out of sync with the fashion of the time, wasn't into gratuitously frightening or teasing children; like his wife and daughter he was invariably kind and supportive of us. For instance, on one occasion when the hay was being drawn in and Nick, at the time a mere five or six, was up under the galvanised steel roof of the hay barn toiling away in the heat and dust un-praised and unnoticed, Jack saw him and roared up to him: "*Good bleddy man you are Nickeen*." Unusual for the time, he seemed to like children.

On top of his sixteen acres Jack kept sheep on the Derrynasaggart Mountains not far away at least by car but a fair hike

without one. Billy of course went with him. After one such jaunt Jack said: "*Billy is a great ould dog. He'll work away all day and shure if he gets tired hit him a flake of a shtick and he's off agin*." Would the animal rightists be all over him now or what? Probably, but Billy was still devoted to him.

On our way to or from Millstreet, we always knew if Jack was in town for Billy was to be found at the same spot not far from the outskirts of the town, sitting or lying on a comfortable spot atop of the ditch beside the road, waiting to join Jack on his way home. Despite his size and strength Billy would go no nearer to the town than that particular spot. When young he had tried to follow Jack the whole way but swarmed by the town dogs he fled. He never tried it again.

Once or twice a year Jack, with the aid of Billy, would bring his flock of sheep down from the mountain to inspect, dip, etc. Billy would keep them penned in a corner of the field while Jack walked in among them and grabbed this one or that one – whichever he thought needed a closer look. Quietly and efficiently, without orders from Jack, Billy would weave back and forth keeping them penned as needed.

It wasn't only his dog Jack had trained well. The same was true of his donkey and, as with Billy, he had taught it a non-utilitarian trick or two as we found out when we persuaded the Aunts to let us borrow Jack's donkey-and-car(t) to go to town for what purpose I have no idea. Maybe we just thought it was cool.

Before we set off he told us the "ould dunkey" was easy to handle but unless we gave it a penny ice cream from T'womey's shop on our way home it would refuse to go on. Used to having our legs pulled we didn't quite believe him. We should have. When on the way back, going by T'womey's the donkey stopped and refused to budge. We bought the required penny ice cream, stuck it in its mouth and docile and obedient as ever, off it trotted. Compliments I suppose of her grandfather Hegarty Aunt Margaret was the T'womey family's ground landlord.

Mrs. Moynihan was a small women always dressed in a long

black skirt with a shawl over her shoulders. She usually sat in a homemade barrel chair into which she neatly fitted, on the right side of the large open kitchen fireplace where a few sods of turf invariably, I won't say burnt, so much as smouldered. She always seemed delighted to see us and like Siobhan fussed over us though I have little memory of her saying much of anything except for interjecting: "*Glory!*" or "*Glory be to God. Is that a fact*?" to anything anyone else said, in particular to her husband Jack's tall tales and some of those were basketball player tall. On the surface anyway she seemed to accept everything he said as the God-given truth.

She felt the cold dreadfully. Jack ascribed this to a blood transfusion she had had some years before concerning which he said: "*That ould transfused blood isn't natural blood at all; 'tis lying cold in her*" implying the transfused blood was some sort of heavy oily liquid that pulled by gravity had finished up in her feet and wouldn't move or warm up.

When they replaced the open fire place with a fitted kitchen stove Jack's diagnosis proved false. For the first time the limited heat the burning turf produced in the open fireplace stopped going straight up the large open chimney and Mrs. Moynihan's warmed up, feet "*ould transfused blood*" and all.

In later years when in our teens, Cork accents more or less gone though we didn't realise it, we still summered regularly at Willowbrook, and would visit the Moynihans even if by then more out of sense of duty than anything else. They were always delighted to see us and as hospitable as ever though by then no longer the small children they remembered but large angular teenagers with English accents, quite unintentionally, we clearly intimidated poor Siobhan and her mother: not so Jack.

On one such occasion Jack's other daughter visited with her English husband and by chance we arrived when they were there. The only thing I remember about that occasion was this man telling us that in England telegraph poles were sometimes fixed in place in the ground by means of a small explosion. A lively discussion followed. Like his wife and daughter, I was

afraid Jack would be intimidated and not join in, not a bit of it. Jack, I was delighted to see, held forth on this subject with his usual confidence.

By the time Aunt Margaret stopped farming I had begun to change my allegiance to my O'Brien relatives in Co. Waterford, in the process I lost contact with the Moynihans. In due course Mrs. Moynihan and Jack died. Siobhan sold the place and moved to Millstreet town. I suppose she too is long dead.

Years later when visited from Canada I persuaded my brothers to join me sans spouses in a visit to Willowbrook. The wives agreed but were not pleased. Looking for the house of the new owner - we knew it was in that vicinity - to get the key and permission to do so, we stopped to ask a man on an old Ferguson tractor on what had been the Moynihans, for directions. It turned out it was he who had bought the Moynihan's old place and a few more acres. His son - his only child I think - was an engineer in the USA and had no intention of coming back. I suppose it has changed hands again by now.

The Healys were the Moynihans' nearest but estranged neighbours, goodness knows why. Even though my mother indicated she and her sisters as children had been friendly with the Healys somehow it was at the Moynihans' cottage not the Healys house we became persona grata. Though I have no memory of ever been told anything about this estrangement we must have known something about it because we never considered dropping into the Healys even though they lived only fifty yards or so further down the same lane.

Nevertheless, I suppose their doings must occasionally have popped up for I knew, and this before we returned to England in 1945, the oldest member of the family was so old he had been alive during the worst years of the famine. This means that even if that great triumph of laissez-faire capitalism seems so far back in history, in terms of individual lives lived, his and mine, it is not even two completed lives ago.

Killing the Pig

In a novel (*'The Mountain and the Valley'*) Nova Scotia writer Ernest Buckler graphically describes the killing and butchering of a pig on an Annapolis Valley farm in the early part of twentieth century. In rural Co Cork in the nineteen forties and fifties the scenario was much the same though there were differences.

The major one perhaps, being the method by which the pig was killed. In Buckler's description the first job was to get the animal lined up and still long enough to dispatch it with a bullet in the head, killing it as near instantly as possible.

In Co. Cork this instant death refinement was absent not least because the necessary weapon was much harder to come by. Apart from rifles being an unaffordable luxury for most, it was not that long since armed conflict had convulsed the country and even if a farmer could afford a rifle a license was hard to get. That is not to say there were no functioning rifles (and hand guns) around; with remnants of both civil war factions alive and still mutually suspicious I am sure there were, but hidden from neighbours and police alike. Shotguns were available, almost every farmer had one, but a shotgun was quite unsuitable for this job.

Local people also believed the less blood in the meat the better the quality and a live struggling pig bled better and more completely than a flaccid dead one. That such a slower death was more cruel didn't count for much.

Consequently, instead of being instantly put out of its misery by a rifle shot in the head, with the help of a few strong neighbours the terrified, fully conscious, squealing pig was cornered, grabbed and hauled from its sty onto the temporarily displaced kitchen table standing nearby in the upper yard.

Once there and firmly held, 'Paddy Black' (a nickname; he had dark features) the 'pigsticker', the central figure in the drama, the lead actor, took centre stage. Paddy was a thin,

morose, prematurely aged, unhealthy looking little man with reportedly several half starved looking children, a cowed wife, a strong affinity for Guinness and a history of tuberculosis. He loved his job.

A quick slash of the skin at the side of the neck and the blade of his long sharp knife was in the pig's carotid artery. If the poor pig had squealed loudly before it was nothing to the screams it made now. But the carotid is a large artery that comes directly off the arch of the aorta in both man and pig and, hastened by its struggles, the pig's blood gushed dramatically from its neck.

As it rapidly approached death the pig's loud screams declined from an ear splitting piercingly high contralto, through an ever quieter ever lower bass rumble to a sad defeated little gurgle followed by silence. No doubt one of us going through the same end would sing a similar spontaneous song in roughly the same sequence.

Since the dying pig's blood was the essential ingredient of black puddings, it had to be collected in a bucket as it poured from its neck. For reasons not too difficult to discern this was not a coveted job and anyone foolish or curious enough to be in the vicinity might be dragged in to hold the bucket for the fountain of blood. On one occasion at least that handy someone was me; there can be a price for curiosity.

I suppose it ought to have been a horrifying, traumatising nightmare-producing experience for a boy of seven or eight. I can't say I enjoyed it but I did what I was told to do, collected the blood and had neither nightmares nor other adverse reactions then or later. That is not to suggest I was not frightenable at that time; the opposite was the case. I was full of fears, phobias - of spiders, of the dark, of ghosts and more - and had nightmares.

My lack of a significant reaction to such a noisy, violent and bloody event was partially due to the fact that, like most of our farm child contemporaries, we were daily witnesses to the suffering, pain, injury and death of animals that were and still are inevitable features of any farm producing meat, milk and eggs from its own produce. The butchering of fowl and animals

whether done behind the walls of a slaughterhouse or in middle of a farmyard is never the least bit noble or painless. Like other farm raised children, we had little choice but to get used to it.

It was for instance one of the hired men's jobs to kill birds such as hens, geese, turkeys and ducks for the table; of a hired woman to pluck them.

If right handed, the man assigned the job caught and lifted the bird then held it against his left side with his left arm to control the wings and with his left hand grabbed the bird's beak and neck at the same time and squeezing them together thereby holding the top of the head exposed stretched and reasonably still. With a carving knife held in his right hand he cut down into top of the birds head. A 'chithooge' (left hander, 'thoo' to rhyme with 'foe') would do the job the other way around. The killing done he held the bird upside down by the legs as it reflexly flapped its wings more and more feebly and rapidly bled to death; not a pretty sight.

Then there were wild rabbits. These existed in untold millions and did much damage to crops and grazing land all over the country. They were trapped in leg hold traps, snared, hunted with dogs, ferreted and netted and shot. It hardly put a dent in their numbers. Some of the men snared and trapped rabbits on the side as they were saleable at the Friday market in town. As a result a couple of dead and gutted rabbits hanging from a nail somewhere in the yard were a common sight. Not infrequently the farmyard cats hunted rabbits and got caught in the traps, the result - a crippled paw for life.

It was a rare time, when the sloping galvanised roof of the 'car(t) 'house' in the upper yard did not carry a dead hen, rat, cat or other creature thrown up there out of way of pigs, dogs, cats or other animals. These dead creatures could have been buried but this was the quicker, easier way to get rid of them.

On one occasion the body of a young pig (too big to be thrown on the car'house roof) that had died from causes unknown was left unburied on the large manure heap a few feet from the busy gate that separated the upper from the lower yards. I remember

distinctly the blue sheen on the swollen corpse. It was impossible not to see and smell it if the wind was in the wrong direction. It was left there until it melded into the manure.

Catching rats like rabbit, in leg hold traps, was the first way we ever earned any money; 'threpence' a small rat, four pence a large one. We used to set the traps at night before we went to bed. When we found a rat caught in one next morning the unfortunate rat was usually still alive. We killed it with a stick or a shovel or whatever weapon came to hand.

To collect our money, Aunt Margaret had to view the evidence, the body of a rat. This she did from the lobby window, her equivalent of the Buckingham Palace balcony to the Queen while we, standing below in the yard, proudly displayed our catch of the night for her perusal.

I can remember Dick ostensibly demonstrating the ferocity of rats by putting the end of a stick in front of a trapped rat. This it instantly attacked. Even then I recognised this was not a fair test. The rat terrified and in agony couldn't escape. It was only natural for it to fight desperately for its life or relief from the pain. Why wouldn't it fight back?

He had also learnt that if you spun a dead rat around by the tail fast enough the skin came off the tail and away went the rat for its first and probably second last flight with the thrower left holding the tail skin; its last flight was usually onto the car'house roof. I don't think I ever had the chutzpah to give this trick a whirl.

Given such daily experiences catching blood in a bucket was not such a big deal. In addition, in order to let as little blood as possible spill and keep out of the way at the same time, I had to concentrate on what I was doing and it's difficult to keep one's mind fully on two things at once.

After the pig was dead the men pushed the pig carcass off the table into a barrel of water brought as near to boiling as possible on the back kitchen fireplace. There it was left for a short while before being hauled out of the barrel onto the table once again and the hot water softened, soiled, hairy epidermis scraped off with knives.

That done the men carried the table plus the newly cleansed, femininely pink carcass to the 'coach house' (where the pony trap and later the car were kept). This was not only the cleanest yard building but had a high ceiling with a pulley, (maybe still there), attached to the supportive ceiling joists and a wide entrance door making it easy to carry in the large pig baring table. 'Paddy Black' then made cuts behind the pig's Achilles tendons and a piece of a broken axe, fork or shovel handle was inserted into these cuts. A rope attached to this bit of handle was run over the pulley or bar and the carcass hauled off the table, rear end first, until it was nearly free of the table. The latter was then removed leaving the head hanging a foot or two above the floor.

Paddy still at centre stage then slit open the abdomen from anus to sternum. The attachments of the intestines to body cavity were severed and, filled with liquidised half digested food the highly flexible entrails poured out of the opened abdominal cavity into a large galvanised basin strategically placed on the ground below the hanging head. One of the organs removed that didn't go into this container was the bladder. This was removed separately. Sometimes one of the men emptied the bladder, tied off the ureters with a bit of twine and using a straw inserted into the urethra, blew it up and we had a primitive football. These rarely lasted long; either the dogs got them or they dried out, burst, got smelly or disintegrated. They were not great footballs but at least they didn't hurt our bare feet when we kicked them. The anus and tail were removed in one piece and subtle as ever, some of the men got a laugh out of chasing us with these or throwing them at us, not that we minded much that I remember.

Near the coach house was a small stone tank with a water tap above it, normally used to wash the milk churns and buckets after milking. On pig killing occasion one of the men emptied the basin of intestines into this tank and washed them out for use as sausage skins. If holding the bucket for the blood didn't bother me much, the sight of the six to nine inch long, still living, squirming (as I discovered later Safaris suum) parasitic round worms washed from the intestine did make me queasy

though not enough to put me off the sausages later. A close relative of these the human variant is called Safaris lumbricoides

By an odd coincidence in Premed Zoology the first thing we were given to dissect were pig Ascaris suum worms. It was like meeting old friends again. These though formaldehyde preserved did have one nasty trick left in their box of the same. When prodded with a scalpel the females had a nasty habit of bursting and spraying eggs all over the place. No doubt the eggs were as dead as the worms and presumably not of the human variety; still it was a bit unnerving.

The final butchering job was to cut the main body parts of the pig into joints appropriate for the kitchen. Initially this produced fresh pork for a day or two but lacking refrigeration this was strictly for a day or two at most. The rest of the cut joints were first put into a barrel of (I think) saltpetre dissolved in water and left there for I can't remember how long. They were then removed, dried and salt rubbed on every surface and into every crevice and cranny. If the salting job was done properly salted bacon lasted almost indefinitely. Finally these salted joints were hung from hooks in the kitchen ceiling, the rusted stumps of which, if by now the house has not collapsed, may still be there like the pulley or bar in the coach house. There the salted joints remained until taken down one by one, boiled and eaten.

Like most such Irish country/farm houses of the time unlike those in most if not all of Canada including Nova Scotia, Willowbrook and its attached farm buildings were designed to make it possible for the 'upstairs' dwellers virtually to avoid what went on in the farmyard nearby. Consequently, though Aunt Margaret the farmer frequently went into the lower yard to collect eggs and feed the fowl and less frequently the upper yard, the other Pomeroy women including Aunt Van, and upstairs visitors rarely entered the lower yard and virtually never the upper thereby largely avoiding the daily noises, smells, sights, sounds, dirt, routine cruelties and the ordinary, banal horrors of normal farm life.

Chapter 15

The Dummy Block

Sometime in the early years of the war Aunt Margaret sold a number of trees to a contractor. No doubt she was pleased. During the twenties and thirties wood, like many other farm products was worth little or nothing.

Two men did the cutting job with speed, skill and efficiency, using the only tools available then, axe, wedge, mallet, and a two handed 'crosscut', a wide bladed two-man-operated saw with large teeth and wooden handles at each end. Neither sawyer pushed only pulled thereby sending the saw back and forth deepening the cut with every stroke while producing a characteristic repetitive two noted song.

Enduring and adept they could cut a surprising amount in a day. The best logs went to a saw mill. What was left they cut into blocks for firewood. Most of these were too large for the fireplaces and they had to split them with an axe.

To protect the head of the axe, they put the block for splitting on what they called a 'dummy block,' one large and knotted enough not to split easily. Since then every time I split wood for the fire I use a dummy block and am always reminded of those two woodsmen one of whose name was Regan

Their tree felling followed an established routine. They first cut into the front of the trunk (the side facing the direction it was to fall) with the cross-cut to a depth of about 20% of the diameter of the trunk ('butt') a short distance above the ground and then used an axe to open that cut. This helped the tree in the direction wanted, as it increased the effect of gravity, and prevented the trunk, from splitting vertically and kicking back dangerously as the tree fell and hit the ground.

The opened front cut made, using the cross cut again they cut into the back of the trunk a few inches above the wedge shaped front cut.

When everything went as planned and, while we watched it

always did, at the point where there was no longer enough uncut wood left in the trunk to defy the combined forces of weight, gravity and sometimes the wind the tree started to topple. At first the tree moved slowly, then gaining speed, within seconds it crashed noisily to the ground, branches smashing, twigs and leaves flying into the air.

Keen observers, by the time they had completed the contract we didn't just know how to 'fall' a tree, we knew we knew. After all, it was not rocket science and by then we were already quite proficient with axe (small) and bow saw, regularly cutting firewood for the house.

Given this and our new tree-felling knowledge, at some point we - probably as usual older Dick and we followed - decided we should put our wood-cutting know-how into practice. After a bit of a search we found a couple of trees small enough to be cut with the bow saw in a wood on the farther side of a field near enough to the house to get to easily, but out of sight of the farm buildings, yard and house.

Having somehow justified in our own minds what we were about to do we felled the trees, cut them into logs and piled them up neatly. This done, demonstrating conclusively in our minds our expertise, we got out of the logging business for as little reason as we had got into it.

Sometime later on one of their occasional walks around the farm, the Aunts came across the recently cut tree stumps and the nearby neat pile of cut logs. Aunt Margaret assumed one or both of her men had cut them without informing her and with some asperity questioned them. They rightly denied having anything to do with it and were as mystified as she.

I don't know how long it took or on whom it dawned but some time later someone must have realised we had to be the culprits. Duly confronted we confessed to what we saw as an achievement more than a crime. As I remember it we thought they would be more impressed than anything. At the same time we must have known it wasn't exactly kosher for we were careful not to say anything until confronted. They were

impressed all right but even more, aghast for one or more of us might have been killed or injured.

We had difficulty understanding their reaction. In our view we knew what we were doing, was the cut and neatly piled wood not proof of that? Did we not have maybe 10 years between us of practical farm work, including wood cutting experience? Had we not shown we could use an axe and saw? Hadn't we learnt firsthand from a pair of experts how to 'fall' a tree and cut it into logs? What was the fuss about? Funny lot those upstairs females; they thought we knew as little as they did about real work - men's work - like cutting trees and the like and in truth, older, farm reared, experienced in life as they were, they did not.

There were times though when we thought we knew we knew but experience showed only too well we didn't know; once with consequences.

Animals and fowl were fed crushed oats and barley. Large amounts were crushed at the Millstreet mill. Smaller amounts by the men using Aunt Margaret's hand powered crusher, kept in the grain loft.

The heavy, caste iron crusher was made to last - no planned obsolescence in those days. The grain to be crushed was first put into an inverted, cone-shaped hopper at the top of the crusher. At the lower end of the hopper an adjustable gauge fed the uncrushed grain onto a pair of finely grooved, heavy, steel rollers, some six inches or so in diameter. These turned in opposite directions when someone turned the wooden handled driving wheel on the side of the machine crushing the controlled stream of grain fed into the narrow gap between them. A chute below the rollers directed the crushed grain onto the floor or into a bag or other container. Since grains of seasoned and dried wheat, oats and barley are small and hard, the adjustable crusher rollers were very firmly anchored in place. Anything soft fed into the gap between the moving rollers would be flattened.

For some reason we decided the roller's grooves needed to

be cleaned. This done we gave it a trial with Dick providing the power only to find the grooves rapidly filled up again. After a further cleaning it was decided the way to keep the grooves clear of crushed grain was for one of us Nick or me, to put our fingers lightly on the rollers while Dick turned the wheel again. Whether it was because I was 18 months older than Nick and perhaps more worldly wise or not, for whatever reason the job fell to Nick who couldn't have been more than six years old.

The result hardly needs prediction. At some point Nick's attention wandered and he allowed his hand to be carried forward until his fingers tips were pulled between the heavy, unforgiving, moving, grooved rollers. The tips of at least three were crushed before he jerked his hand away in agony and terror.

I still remember the sight of blood gushing from his injured fingers and the sound of his pathetic noisy crying as holding his injured hand with the other he went down the loft steps and walked across the yard into the house desperately seeking solace and relief. Dick and I were so dumbfounded and horrified I think we let him go in on his own.

He was taken to see the local doctor as quickly as the trap could be harnessed. Other than advising my Aunt to keep the injured fingers clean and dressed, there was nothing much he could do he said and I'm sure he was right.

Though the injuries took time to heal they did so without complication or infection. Just as well for if sulphonamides ('M & B' as my father called them), the only class of antibiotics then available had made their appearance elsewhere I don't think they had got as far as Ireland or certainly not as far as rural Co. Cork. It must have one of the rare occasions we created any business for that local spiritual descendant of Hippocrates.

What a source of worry and alarm we must have been to those two women sadly without being any great source of joy or satisfaction then or later.

Chapter 16

Bluebells

During the war years our parents visited once a year and stayed for about a month. Given a war was going on the first leg of the journey, by rail from London to Fishguard in south Wales, was neither safe, easy or comfortable. The second more so as it involved crossing the German U-boat infested notoriously rough Irish Sea from Fishguard to Cork city. The whole thing repeated in reverse when they returned to London. These journeys had to have been exhausting and anxiety filled.

If part of the reason they made these trips was for the sake of a month's rest in peaceful bomb free Ireland, it is a safe assumption their main purpose was to maintain ties with their children.

For such to be maintained and renewed by definition, implies the existence of a remembered previous relationship. Only three years old at the outbreak of the war, a year such a vast expanse of time for a child of that age and most children have little or no ability to remember anything much until somewhat older, I had no memory of a pre-war London life, that included parents. Indeed if neither of my Aunts, Miss Kenny nor anyone else had told me anything I would have had no idea who the strangers were who turned up once a year, stayed for a while and then left.

Consequently I had virtually none of the normal attachment a child feels for his parents and as young children are poor dissimulators, my lack of attachment to them or appreciation of what they had gone through to make these yearly journeys, must have been obvious and painful for them. Consequently of their arrivals and departures I recall only two things. First of the distinct feeling of relief when they left and life returned to normal and second of the formal greeting choreographed by Miss Kenny we were forced to make each year on their arrival.

The first thing we had to do to get this show on the road was

to go into the woods near the house to collect a bunch of the wild bluebells that abounded there. These Miss Kenny tied with a ribbon. This done and the audience, our Aunts, parents and Miss Kenny in their seats in the sitting/dining room, in our Sunday bests with Nick and me as acolytes, Dick the eldest had to present our newly arrived parents with the bunch of bluebells while he read or recited – I can't remember which – a greeting address that I seem to remember he was more or less browbeaten into composing by Miss Kenny ostensibly with our help.

There can be few people less comfortable in this or any such play-acting role on any stage as my older brother. His all too obvious discomfort and embarrassment at having to go through this ordeal was almost as painful for us to watch as for him to perform. It probably wasn't much better for all but Miss Kenny, something to be endured rather than enjoyed for the sake of her amour propre. Ever since, I have been unable to look at bluebells with anything but a jaundiced eye.

Tennis

Like many late eighteenth or nineteenth century houses of the lesser Irish gentry and the new Victorian era upper middle classes of those times, Willowbrook had a properly constructed grass tennis court. Like most such, then and now, it was surrounded by a high lattice wire fence that served dual functions. A common function then and now was to keep tennis balls in the court. The other function is still to keep animals out though now mainly different species. Then in that rural setting it was farm animals, now mainly to keep people (other than the players) and their dogs out.

At Willowbrook in one corner of the court was a small wooden roofed stand or pavilion nine or ten feet long, four feet or so wide and maybe six feet high. This was open in front with a wooden bench against the back wall. This too served dual functions. Spectators could watch in seated comfort and players could shelter there from the all too frequent showers; the bane of tennis players in that wet part of a wet country.

My mother, Aunt Margaret and Aunt Eileen, did not play tennis but were regular spectators. Whether they had played earlier in their lives I don't know. Certainly that sporty flapper Aunt Van played as did their youngest brother William ('Uncle Bill') when he was around as did cousin Des Kelly and I think his sister Joan. Uncle Bill then a bank clerk, usually visited in summer sometimes with, sometimes without his wife and five children. Other occasional players included the managers of the two Millstreet banks, the Catholic Baileys, the Protestant Shaws and their children.

Bill Bailey's wife was my father's second or third cousin and therefore distantly related to us. It was reported of her mother that she had advised her three handsome daughters not to marry money but to "*go where money is*." Whether her mother considered marriage to a bank manager an adequate response

to her proffered advice I don't know.

Bill was a short stout man with a reported short temper and a fondness for alcohol. They had a daughter Miriam; then a plain, plump, brainy girl. On the upper side of the tennis court there was a kitchen garden with gooseberry bushes. On one such tennis playing visit, without seeking permission as would have been polite, Miriam helped herself to gooseberries and stored them in a fold on the front of her sweater. Aunt Van trying to make her look a little less dowdy gave her sweater a quick pull to straighten it. To their mutual embarrassment out popped the 'nicked' gooseberries.

Neither Uncles Nick nor Jerome ever appeared at these gatherings. My father, like his brothers an all-round sportsman played tennis well. Each summer he was the prime mover in cutting the grass, getting out the net and the line marker and making the court playable.

As children we played amongst ourselves or occasionally with cousins or with the children of the guests but tennis rackets were heavy, the net high and tennis is not a child's game.

Nevertheless in time we grew taller, stronger, became less intimidated by the net, the heavy rackets and had inherited some of our father's athletic genes. In particular was this the case with physically precocious Dick. He gained the adult tennis playing ranks early though if I remember rightly without enthusiasm. Naturally built like a body builder though I don't think he ever lifted a weight in his life, with great reflexes, he showed again and again he could play almost any sport. He never bothered to make anything like full use of these natural talents.

Younger, smaller, more slightly built without his sporting talents and damned by birth order anyway to play second cello, I nevertheless in my early teens increased enough in strength, size and ability (in my view) to aspire to moving out of the children's into the grown-ups ranks. To my chagrin, these said grown-ups took far too long (again in my view) to recognise my burgeoning abilities. I was miffed. What was it Charles

Dickens said concerning a younger child's exquisite sensitivity to being treated differently than an older more favoured sibling? He knew: he was such a younger child.

On a particular occasion when my mother happened to be among the half dozen or so adult spectators ensconced in the stand, I expressed my resentment at not being promoted to the adult rank, quietly and grumpily to no-one in particular, but not so quietly the adults would be unaware of my chagrin. One of those who heard was my mother. She peremptorily called me over and in front of all there tore a strip off me, something few could do more effectively, woundingly and brutally. At least partially no doubt I deserved it. Deserved or not I was so profoundly embarrassed and humiliated that, insignificant though the incident might seem at one level, at another it served to warp permanently my already ambivalent relationship with that intimidating woman.

I have no idea when the last tennis game was played in Willowbrook. We continued to use the court for a number of years post-war, when it was still the family pattern to return to Willowbrook for summer holidays.

However it could not have been for that long as the surrounding wire was gone and the court totally neglected by the time Aunt Margaret gave up farming and let her land. Unless artificially removed - highly unlikely - that level area must still be there though the wire is long since gone.

‘ Tiny’ Cashman and the Runaway Trap

Largely independent of men for most things other than as farm labourers - quite unusual in those days - Aunt Margaret was the opposite when it came to travelling, not Aunt Van. Needing to get to and from the town to carry on her dental practice, Aunt Van had a bicycle that she naturally used for other journeys.

Aunt Margaret didn’t have a bike and I am not sure she could cycle. Nor did I hear anyone suggest she ever did or could. It is not at all unlikely her domineering Victorian mother considered cycling at least unladylike if not frankly improper for respectable young women and Aunt Margaret, the oldest and mildest of her four surviving daughters, more than likely got the full brunt of her mother’s social preoccupations before time, experience and more children cooled her jets.

Furthermore there was never a mention of her or her sisters learning to ride or get familiar with handling horses at any time in their lives. Certainly in adulthood none of them ever indicated any such ability or ever took the reins of the pony and trap; curious in a group of women who, in many respects for the time, were brought up to be unusually independent. The result being Aunt Margaret was entirely dependent on others to take her anywhere beyond walking distance. In practice this meant using the pony and trap.

In theory she could have gone to the town any day of the week in the pony and ‘spring car’ (a light work cart with springs) with one of the men doing the daily trip to the creamery with the day’s milk supply.

Even the suggestion of such an impropriety would have made her blush to the roots of her prematurely grey hair. To have done so, not just in her mind but in the minds of her siblings and others, would have been unthinkable, unpardonable, a body blow to the Pomeroy’s social position and prestige. In the heel

of the hunt other than by walking, the only acceptable way for her to travel was by pony and trap.

Since Aunt Margaret was unmarried and we too young to take the reins or at least do so in public (from our very early years we regularly took the reins of the working horses pulling carts around the farm) when she wished to go anywhere beyond easy walking distance she had to get one of the working men to drop whatever he was doing and drive her, a task that nearly always fell to the older and more experienced of the two men

The trap was most commonly used to take Aunt Margaret and/or the other upstairs' denizens to and from the weekly town market or funerals or to mass on Sundays and to the market on Fridays. Usually though not always, these jaunts were uneventful. There may have been others but two abnormal incidents come to mind.

One Sunday after we had joined the line of traps also heading to mass along the 'tar' road - the road from Millstreet to Cork - the pony shied at something, got the bit between its teeth and took off at a gallop rapidly passing out the other traps still in line moving sedately along at the trot. It could have ended badly if the driver had failed to get the pony under control but he did after a bit of a tussle.

The other incident took place on a Friday afternoon in summer shortly after one or both Aunts came back from the Friday market in the trap. At the time Aunt Margaret had hired one 'Tiny' Cashman as the new junior man. He was from 'down the Tanyard,' the poorest part of the town. Presumably there once had been a tanning yard there, only the name survived. Given his town origins it is unlikely he had even minimal if any experience of farm work or farm animals, horses included. Whether it was for this or other reasons Aunt Margaret was uneasy about hiring him in the first place; that I do remember.

In Ireland at the time for those who could not pay or failed to get a place in a church school of some sort, there was no secondary education. 'Tiny' fitted both categories and this being the case he was probably no more than fourteen or fifteen when

he arrived in Willowbrook. Even by the standards of the other labourers who had done time at Willowbrook and were hardly models of sophisticated drawing room gentility, 'Tiny' was rough and uncouth. In addition, probably as a result of poverty and the dietary insufficiency that went with it, his nickname was appropriate, he was small but rough and tough.

At the time we had a rugby ball of sorts given to us I think by Father Francis on one of his visits. Uninvited, 'Tiny' would join us occasionally as we played with this, kicking it wildly all over the place, chasing after it and ruthlessly knocking us out of his way if we were foolish enough to get in it while shouting wildly: "*No foul in ruggy, no foul in ruggy*."

When Aunt Margaret came back from the market one Friday not long after he arrived on the scene, that is, before the poor fellow had not had time to learn anything much about anything, the senior man gave 'Tiny' the job of putting the trap away in the coach house, unharnessing the pony and putting it in the stable nearby.

'Tiny' did manage to get the pony to back the trap into place in the coach house as required but may have done so in a manner that either failed to inspire confidence - and horses are quick to pick up the lack of same in rider or driver - or he frightened and/or hurt it while doing so, nothing unusual, some of the men could be more than rough with the horses, or the animal was stung by a wasp or a bee or who knows.

Whether anything like this actually happened is moot but the next thing he did, even if not the only serious causal factor in and of itself, was certainly the most crucial. He took the winkers off the pony's head first instead of after unhitching it from the trap and taking it to the stable. Without the winkers and the bit in its mouth he had very little control.

To add to the totality of the denouement of this rapidly unfolding drama, the trap had recently been refurbished and a new set of harness made to complement this refurbishment; both were in excellent condition.

Whatever the cause the pony, sans winkers, bolted still attached to the trap by the strong new set of harness. Playing nearby but out of harm's way, Nick and I were made aware

something was going on by the sound of the bolting pony and 'Tiny's desperate shouts.

Even if briefly we had the equivalent of ringside seats and what we saw was the pony galloping down the yard still harnessed firmly to the trap with 'Tiny' desperately hanging on. At the bottom of the yard it took the only available way out of the yard, a sharp ninety degree turn to the left back out through the still open galvanised sheet metal covered gate through which it had just come in at such a speed that the empty trap swung around like a ball on the end of a string and slammed against the open gate with a resounding bang, no doubt frightening the already terrified pony even more, in the process knocking bits off the refurbished trap and denting the gate.

How 'Tiny' was not crushed between the trap and the gate I don't know but he wasn't. What I last saw was the back of the disintegrating trap disappearing down the avenue at high speed, still attached by the strong new harness to the pony with 'Tiny' somehow still holding on. At what point he lost his grip I don't know. Amazingly he suffered no more than a few scratches.

Once the pony got below the house it left the avenue and took off galloping across the sloping front lawn with more pieces flying off the trap the further it went. At the edge of the lawn it jumped the ditch (fence) onto the road leaving the wrecked body of the trap minus the shafts jammed between two trees and kept going.

By an odd chance Uncle Nick happened to be on the road just outside the town a good mile away. He recognised the pony still dragging the attached smashed shafts behind it as his sister's, a compliment even if a back handed one, to the work of Jimmy Connors the harness maker; his new harness just would not give way. Uncle Nick initially feared the worst and was quite surprised to find the only human damage done was the few scratches 'Tiny' received.

I suppose Aunt Margaret must have got the trap and the harness repaired but of this I have no recollection. That was that, the end of 'Tiny's brief Willowbrook tenure, not an auspicious start to his working life. Like the other men he disappeared without trace from our ken; no more 'ruggy' with him.

No More Bull

Having once had to run for our lives (or so we thought anyway) from one of Berty Shea's rangy specimens, we were distinctly uneasy when it came to bulls, even if it never crossed our minds to consider cows anything other than the epitome of placidity and honest cowardice.

Apart from this personal experience we had been told often enough bulls can be unpredictable and dangerous. This was no mere fairy story. A cousin's grandfather, an experienced farmer, was gored to death by a bull he considered almost a pet.

On one of our Mount Leader visits Uncle Jer happened to be at home and in his first and last effort to engage with us as children in a direct way that I remember, he announced he was going to euthanise a tuberculosis bull (though I am sure he did not use the word 'euthanise') and invited us to watch the show. Presumably Uncle Jer thought this was if not suitable entertainment, at least a salutary experience for his young nephews, then again maybe he was childless for a good reason.

I don't know if my brothers had any idea how he would actually dispatch the bull. I certainly didn't. Knowing a thing or two about the character, size, speed and temper of bulls I thought he would shoot it from behind a tree or a stone ditch or something dramatic or colourful the way cowboys ambushed Indians or vice versa in the Wild West films we saw on Sundays at the local cinema, starring the likes of Ronald Reagan and Gene Autry. Even then I thought the Great Communicator was an even worse actor than Gene Autry and he was pretty dire.

I assumed even if fatally injured by a shot, the bull would still gallop around for a while before it expired and during that final gallop would make a vigorous attempt to even the score with its tormentor, in this case Uncle Jer, who presumably was safely hidden and out of reach.

It was therefore more than a surprise, I was flabbergasted,

thunderstruck, amazed when a be-hatted as usual Uncle Jer in his usual professional attire - a none too clean long brown coat over his ordinary clothes - strolled casually towards the bull standing, unmoving and unthetered a mere twenty or so yards away. In his left hand he held a wooden handled, bell shaped metal object and in his right a small wood mallet. Irrespective of the bull's then quiescent, sick state, to me going near an unthetered bull in any mood no matter how sick without an immediate means of escape, particularly one more than merely irritated by whatever he was going to do with these seemingly feeble weapons was to my mind folly in the extreme. They seemed such grossly inadequate weapons for the safe elimination of such a large, powerful, unpredictable beast as a bull.

Given this preconception, after getting over my initial surprise, I secretly looked forward with great interest and rising expectations to the sight of Uncle Jer, all cool and dignity gone, running like hell around the field hotly pursued by a very angry, injured bull bent on evening the score. Now that would have been exciting to see and what a story to tell.

I was not just surprised then as so much as bitterly disappointed by the actual denouement. He walked up the bull, put the bell shaped end of this fragile looking instrument on its forehead and struck the end of the handle of the bell with the wooden mallet. There was a dull unimpressive little thud, the bull's legs folded under it immediately and down it went with a thump to the ground, where it remained without making a sound, perfectly still and that was that. It was all so terribly banal, anticlimactic, unexciting and disappointing; no action at all. The innocuous looking but obviously deadly tool I discovered later was a 'humane killer.'

To deepen our experience Uncle Jer then proceeded to do a rough post mortem examination on the late bull, hacking open its body cavities and organs to show us its grossly infected tuberculous lungs and the masses of tubercular pus in its windpipe and bronchi. Even with no knowledge of pathology

it was obvious why the bull didn't run anywhere. Its respiratory system was so blocked by the tuberculous disease process it must have been extremely difficult for the poor animal to breathe at all. It can hardly have been able to remain standing not to mind chase Uncle Jerome anywhere no matter how much he abused it. Uncle Jer had risked nothing when he strolled up to it so casually and, with the innocent looking humane killer, punch that fatal hole in its forehead.

I can't say I found any part of the post mortem particularly interesting or entertaining and the sight and smell of the animal's insides was nauseating. Equally I can't say I found it particularly disturbing either though obviously, it made such an impression I remember it in some detail seventy years later.

The next post mortem I saw was on a human body in a hospital morgue. It was a requirement of our pathology course in Medical School that we attend at least six of these. Despite three years in the anatomy rooms I never got used to post mortems. It was the smell. It still boggles my mind how forensic pathologists can work on half rotten human corpses and not get violently sick every time. They do though tend to become a macabre lot with an equally macabre sense of humour.

Chapter 20

A Test of Prayer

Like most children reared in a family and community of religious believers, Roman Catholicism (RC) in our case, from a very early age I was instructed more accurately obliged, to kneel down beside my bed at night and '*say my prayers*.' The reason given for the necessity of doing this I was repeatedly told, was that according to the gospels, God had said prayer could move mountains, and that being the case it was my duty to pray to him at least every night for such laudable objectives as the safety of my absent parents, for the suffering souls in purgatory and this kind of thing.

Growing older and I suppose starting to understand the meaning of language better, it occurred to me if as my mentors claimed, God would move whole mountains why couldn't He move a few - for Him - mere bumps in the ground for me, such as making sure I got a certain present for my birthday or Christmas, or no 'lessons' that day, or catch a rat in my trap that night (and thereby earn 'thripence') or for fine weather the next day, this kind of solid no-nonsense, practical, concrete stuff. The results tended to be a lot less than the satisfaction guaranteed variety, peddled by my elders and betters.

Given these less than stellar results at some point uncertainty began to seep into my developing mind. I became pretty sure no matter how hard I prayed, not only would such surely minor requests not be granted there was not a snowball's chance in hell the Derrynasaggart Mountains would disappear during the night.

To prove or disprove this heretical hypothesis I decided to test the claimed efficacy or lack of it, of prayer. The question was how to do this without anyone finding out as I was afraid my devout Catholic Aunts or Miss Kenny, would be shocked if they did and no doubt they would have been, with unknown but most likely unpleasant consequences.

In practice what could they possibly have done? Nevertheless, firmly entrenched in my mind was the fear some drastic unrevealed punishment would follow such naughtiness especially if the nature of that naughtiness was in any way blasphemous which this clearly was. Though in practice no such punishment had ever followed previous episodes of bad behaviour that fear for some reason remained firmly entrenched in my mind.

After some considerable thought, the test devised had a certain simple, primitive, logical, scientific consistency of which I am still not a little proud. It was as follows.

That night when I knelt down beside my bed to say my usual night prayers, I prayed as long and as hard as I could that I would go to sleep as usual, wake early, go to sleep again and awake next day at the usual time, in the normal course of events an abnormal sleep pattern for once asleep my usual pattern was to sleep through until morning.

I had decided on this particular plan because it was simple, involved no one else and there was little or no danger of being 'caught.' Though I knew they wouldn't snitch on me deliberately I didn't tell my brothers. I was afraid, one or the other might inadvertently let the bird out of the cage. They too were kept in the dark.

It was only later the next day I remembered doing the test and realised my prayers had been answered. I had gone to sleep as per, woken up, gone to sleep again and awoke at the usual time.

I would like to be able to report a permanent conviction, that all was well with heaven and hell and that prayer was not just another example of adults stringing us along. This may have been the case for a while and I kept praying for years thereafter, however, there remained a degree of doubt that gradually grew until as a young adult, I couldn't swallow the rationale anymore and simply quit praying more or less. I lamely have to confess not entirely.

Early indoctrination is a powerful force and in extreme

situations doubts about doubts have prevailed and I am still prone to essay a prayer in some circumstances. To excuse this relapse into irrationality as someone observed in the trenches of WW1, it was said even avowed atheists prayed.

It is though more difficult to explain away what might be called a ‘flight into prayer’ or something near it by a person who appears to have received no such indoctrination. Such is my granddaughter Olivia.

Diagnosed at the age of five with a rare form of cancer, she had to go through the standard protocol of the time for that particular type of cancer. This involved ‘chemo’ and radiation and consequently she suffered many of the harsh, prolonged, cruel side effects associated with those treatments.

Despite the fact that neither of her parents are religious in any formal sense and as far as I know, have made no effort to instill in her any form of religious belief nor did anyone else, throughout the prolonged period of her illness, pain and suffering she said she always felt "Goddy" was looking after her. She survived damaged in body maybe but not in spirit.

Rags to Riches

A pre-occupation of Aunt Van's and of our distant mother was the fear we might become horror of horrors, 'common,' forget our descent from that Norman Knight and our relationship with the Protestant gentry, distant though it might be. Perhaps not entirely trusting Aunt Margaret in these matters may have been one of the reasons Aunt Van joined us from London some months after we arrived.

This may have been the reason Dick was withdrawn from the Millstreet primary school in 1942 or '43. On the other hand by then already eight years and as a male maybe no longer acceptable in the co-ed primary school. That meant if he was to continue his schooling in Millstreet, he would have had to go to the local National School. There he almost certainly would have made friends and the odds are some if not most would regrettably be of the common variety. National school was mixed.

Consequently the only children approved for us to mix with on anything like a regular basis were our Pomeroy cousins, the 'Claras' and the 'Dunmanways,' and for geographical reasons we didn't see much of them either. Not until later did we even know of the existence of our three female Pomeroy cousins in Co. Mayo.

The nearest were cousins Dick and Judy 'Clara' who lived on the other side of Clara mountain only 2 or 3 kms. away as the crow flies; a good hike for a fit adult; too much for young children. The others were the five 'Dunmanways' living 50 kms. or so away. This being a vast distance in those days they were rare visitors. Even when they did visit, the only ones of any value to us as playmates were the oldest two, Dick and Sheila. The two youngest were too young and the second, Jack, was a nervous, giggly boy, terrified of his own shadow. We could make nothing of him and in the harsh way of children, paid him little attention.

We never visited them for apart from the difficulty of getting there I suspect their father, Uncle Bill, being the sole wage earner and a low level employee of the Munster and Leinster Bank, was poorly paid and so ashamed of their level of poverty he did not want his older sisters to see it. Banks then as now are anything but generous to their lower level employees.

Dick had acquired one good friend at primary school, Noelly. After he left the school this boy surreptitiously visited us from time to time. Apart from being adventurous and good fun, isolated as we were he was a new presence, a breath of fresh air and, even if we didn't realise it, more than a little bored with each other's company. Brothers it hardly needs to be said are not necessarily all that compatible.

Unfortunately Aunt Van found out. When she did he was summarily banned from Willowbrook. To this day it burns me to think she did such a thing, not just because he had never done anything to justify such a gratuitous insult but because it perpetuated our unwanted, unhealthy social isolation.

Over sixty years later wandering through downtown Calgary, Alberta, the financial and technological epicentre of Canada's oil industry, at 114 Stephen St, I came across 'James Joyce's Authentic Irish Pub' and went in for a pint and a rest. As seems to be standard in such hostelries in North America and elsewhere, the walls of Joyce's are festooned with photos, pictures, old advertisements and other memorabilia from or associated with the 'ould sod.'

In this particular place the washrooms (gents' toilets) are down a flight of stairs. On the walls of the stairs are two advertisements or at least this was the case on Monday the December 28th 2009. One of these is for Guinness, the other for the then - at the printing date - forthcoming super middleweight world boxing championship between Chris Eubank of Bristol (England) and Steve Collins of Dublin (Ireland) to be held at the Green Glens Arena in Millstreet, Co. Cork on 18 March 1995.

That long ago friend of Dick's from the Millstreet primary

school by whom we were in danger of being permanently and grievously contaminated with 'commonness' was Noel C. Duggan, among many other things the owner of the above mentioned Green Glens Arena.

'Noelly' turned out to be one of the most able self made men Millstreet ever produced and this nondescript North Cork country town produced several such during the century and a half plus before his time. One of the earliest if not the earliest, being our great grandfather, Jeremiah Hegarty; the Noel C. of his day.

Snobbery no doubt can be corrosive to the snubbed. How for instance did the intelligent, youthful, perceptive Noel feel at being summarily banished from Willowbrook? It is a dead certainty, human nature being what it is at least some of the snubbed do not forget it and wealth can offer handy opportunities to even the score.

Though I am not suggesting Noel thought or acted like this I don't blame him if he did. In similar circumstances I would have had a hard time resisting an opportunity to even the score. Not for anything he said or did, for he never said or did anything in the broadest sense wrong but for being who he was, someone not quite as fully human as the Pomeroys for that surely was the implication of his banishment.

What for instance might have been the result if the Pomeroys had helped and supported not insulted the bright, pleasant boy who developed into the able, wealthy Noel C? Would Mount Leader, our late Uncle Jerome's house (which Noel bought) be the ruin it is now?

It was not, according to him that he deliberately let Mount Leader go, as I implied when I wrote to him on the subject some years ago. It was, he said, a cash flow difficulty. And there is no question but that by the time he bought it, saving and renovating it would have been a costly project. Nevertheless, later, when presumably the cash flow had improved, he seems to have made no attempt to rescue what was aesthetically and architecturally the finest house for miles around.

If, despite the way he was treated, he was and is big enough a man not to be bothered with evening the score and this may well be the case, certainly there was nothing in his relationship with the Pomeroys, no obligation - indeed the opposite - to motivate him to rescue a place or places associated with them. What long term effect would help, kindness and compassion rather than insult and belittlement have made on him during what was, compared to ours anyway, a hard childhood?

In my view though the snubbed may be humiliated and with justification deeply resent it, I believe the most corrosive aspect of snobbery is not the injury or insult inflicted on those snubbed, it is the way it distorts, narrows and impoverishes the lives of the snobs. For them, individuals and even whole groups, are excluded permanently and irretrievably irrespective of their talents, abilities and achievements; a stupid, limiting, self induced form of social, spiritual and intellectual deprivation for which snobs pay a heavy if well deserved price.

Mount Leader House today

The 'Maags'

Except accidentally, our Aunts had virtually no social contact with their neighbours. I doubt if, as adults any of the Pomeroy sisters had ever been near not to mind in any of their houses since childhood and maybe not even then. The neighbours were 'common' and that was that; a view of themselves vis a vis the Pomeroys the same neighbours seemed to accept.

When an accidental meeting did take place the Aunts were addressed as Miss Pomeroy ('Pumerigh') or Miss Margaret ('Marghret') or later Mrs. Cronin (after Aunt Van married) and in turn were addressed only by their first names. It was the same in the town. The shopkeepers were Paddy, Tim, Mary or whatever, the Aunts Miss Pumerigh, Mrs. Cronin…

Not quite all the neighbours. Jer 'Maag' (to rhyme with Prague) one of a brace of bachelor brothers, the poorest most ragged of those neighbours, was the exception. When Jer strolled into the yard bent on borrowing a shovel, a fork, a rake or the like and happened to encounter Aunt Margaret, Margaret she was and "Mahrghret" he called her; the Miss went missing. As it happened his mother's Christian name too was Margaret; thus the nickname 'Maag.' As a rule what he borrowed stayed borrowed until someone went to bring it back.

I have no memory of Aunt Margaret refusing Jer. Maybe she was a bit afraid of him or possibly of his brother,'Jack the Bard.' She was wise to be wary of Jack anyway.

In the Bardic tradition, he was given to composing scurrilous rhymes about those that crossed him or his brother, or about anyone from whom he thought he might get a rse.

A remembered line or two of one his poetic efforts, gives their tenor:

"…… *darling Miss Kenneally*
She fell asleep by a horny sheep way back in Ballydaly"

I had no idea then of the ballad's implications but knew they were not complimentary.

His subject in this instance was a young female teacher who was very attractive to the young bloods of the area at the time. He no doubt exaggerated the situation beyond recognition at her and their expense. And, as was the way with such creations, it was further exaggerated by others over the years.

(See the Annex for verses of the ballad.)

Another victim of this latter day, Irish, bucolic Alexander Pope's acid tainted pen was a neighbour's farm worker though how the latter earned Jack's enmity I have no idea. Whatever the cause or what tales Jack spread about him he was so steamed by Jack's versifying he went after him with his 'ash plant' (walking/working stick).

According to Maria, the Willowbrook maid at the time, despite being under attack, Jack managed to pull out his penknife, open it and stab his assailant in one eye. When she asked Jack why there he replied; "*I meant to bring out the eye*." He had, it seemed, meant to put the blade in above this man's eye and lever it out. He failed to do that but blinded him in that eye. Jack was not a man to cross.

Why the 'Maags' were nicknamed after an abbreviation of their mother's Christian name and not, as was usual, after their Kelleher father, I don't know. Maybe he had died young or left his wife or gone mad or he had married into the farm or perhaps he impregnated but never married her - who knows. The last possibility, if nothing else, would have marked the Maag brothers for life even if they were the most normal people imaginable.

Though we knew their surname was Kelleher (pronounced Kaileher) their mother's surname was also revealed one day when he arrived in the Willowbrook yard on yet another implement borrowing foray. One of Aunt Margaret's men seeing him coming said sotto voce so Jer wouldn't hear:

"*Here comes Jer Maag Horan*
With the arse of his britches all torn."

Nothing unusual in those days; relatively speaking all new clothes were expensive. Farm work was hard on clothes and no matter how well made they wore out and holes appeared sooner or later, most commonly over the backside and knees, places that received the most wear. The arses of most farm labourers' and many farmers' britches too were or had been "all torn" and repaired several times over.

Jer's britches were in this tradition. They did have a relatively unusual feature. The patches were attached on the upper side only, gravity being relied on to make sure the hole the patch was designed to cover was covered while at the same time, reducing the amount of sewing to a minimum.

Even if the gravity suspended patches were unusual they were not unique. In most cases they probably indicated, as in his case, the bachelor status of the wearer, and bachelors were not uncommon.

In the activities necessary for their mutual survival, the brothers took different roles; Jack that of the farmer's wife, Jer of the husband. They seemed to stick fairly closely to these. I personally have no memory of Jack coming to Willowbrook at any time though Dick said he did appear at threshings mainly to avail himself of the good meal provided for the helpers, though the amount of help Jack supplied in return was as limited as he could make it.

These being his only appearances at Willowbrook, I never saw him interact with Aunt Margaret and don't know if he treated her or her sisters with the same familiarity as brother Jer. Somehow I doubt it.

As behooved his uxorial status Jack usually dressed more respectably than Jer, in an aged suit.

The time they got up in the morning and the quality of their work in their differing roles, provided pretty convincing evidence neither Jack nor Jer were devotees of the Protestant or any other work ethic nor were they strong believers in the godliness and cleanliness association either. They both seemed to do as little as was needed to keep body and soul together

Not that Jer's ambivalent performance as farmer deterred him from dispensing agricultural advice.

One spring day for instance, when the Willowbrook men were out sowing grain by hand in the usual way, so many buckets per acre, and we happened to be there, Jer climbed over the ditch separating the two farms and joined us. After the usual exchange of greetings and comments about the weather, he voiced his strong disapproval of their sowing method and extolled his own telling them to: "*Look over towards Dan Healy's and fire it* (the grain) *over your shoulder as far as you can*." If his own crops were anything to go by his "*firing over your shoulder*" method was at least open to question.

If Jer was not much cop outside the house Jack didn't seem to be much cop inside it either or at least he went pretty easy on the house cleaning. We knew this first hand, for sometimes we were the ones sent to retrieve some article Jer had borrowed and as usual failed to return.

Even if we were sent in the morning, it would not have been before breakfast (around 8.30 a.m.) and the 'Maag's house was a fair walk away. That being the case we would not have arrived at Chez 'Maag' at anything like the crack of dawn. Nevertheless we always found them still apparently asleep in bed upstairs and had to make quite a racket and wait a while to get one of them to come downstairs. It was always Jer.

We were not put out at all by the delay. It gave us time to look around their kitchen over the (lower) closed half door that separated the kitchen from the yard where we stood.

On at least one occasion we saw a sow lying on a bed of straw under the stairs with ten or a dozen young bohams ('bonuvs') snuggled up against her belly sleeping or feeding.

When it comes to hygiene pigs get a bad rap. Given the opportunity they are clean animals, cleaner than horses or cows. If they can possibly avoid it they do not foul their beds. Nevertheless there comes a time when a cow, horse, pig, or person has no choice but to answer the command of their digestive tract. In the case of pigs if their pens are big enough

they go to a spot away from where they sleep or eat. Given the closed half door the sow had no other choice but to use another part of the kitchen. Having to deal with this little problem before cooking or eating breakfast, might put off the more fastidious but fastidious the 'Maags' were not.

It was not that the pig shit had been left there to pile up for a week or anything; the night's production was probably shovelled out daily or every couple of days anyway onto a manure heap handily placed only a few feet behind us in the yard where we stood looking in over the half door. Nevertheless, pig shit there was on the kitchen floor.

When Jer eventually did arrive downstairs he was bare footed, dressed in dirty long johns, yawning noisily and rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand.

As he walked towards us from the foot of the stairs across the kitchen floor his feet showed the same robust lack of devotion to soap and water as his long johns, a fact that impressed us greatly.

While the pig manure on the kitchen floor didn't seem to bother him in the least that we had found him still in bed must have, for he always offered an excuse and always the same one: "*I was up late lasht night with an ould cow*"- that is a cow calving.

There were more than a few usually derisive stories about the 'Maags.' None of these underemphasised their peculiarities and deficiencies. An example was a story told with great gusto by one of Aunt Margaret's men after he returned from helping at one of their annual threshings.

According to him while Jack who, like most men at that time smoked a pipe, kneaded the dough for the bread he baked in preparation for threshing, he would let go a tobacco spit or two into the dough to give it flavour.

The only time I clearly remember seeing Jack was when we came across him taking their churn of milk to or from the Millstreet creamery in their 'donkey and car'(t). Always dressed in the old suit he was apparently not averse to downing a pint

or two or three before he set off home, though I can't say I was aware of this at the time.

This was I think his one regular farm-related duty and a pleasant enough one at that, at least on a fine day. It is possible though, like the maid in Willowbrook, he also helped with the milking.

Neither Jack nor Jer produced any known offspring. Their mother had I think three nephews, wild young men known for unknown reasons as 'Punt,' 'Nook' and 'Raggedy Arse.' Presumably one or all inherited the place.

The last time I looked for the remains of their house, a good number of years ago, all I could find was a few ruined walls and that with difficulty. Now I suppose these too would be as hard to find as anyone who remembers them.

Naldy

Our first cousin Des (Desmond) Kelly had preceded us at Willowbrook a decade or so earlier. As a child his mother, our Aunt Eileen, had placed him in Aunt Margaret's care following the early death of her WW1 veteran, alcoholic, doctor husband. Des's older sister Joan - later my godmother - remained with their mother. Des, it seems, always felt his mother had deserted him and greatly resented it, in the circumstances not surprising though I suppose she felt she had little choice. By the time we arrived in 1939 he was a pre-medical student at University College Cork and only an occasional visitor to Willowbrook.

Naldy was a bad tempered, poorly trained pony too small and fat to be of any use on the farm. She had originally arrived as a present for Des from his mother when he was a boy. An effort to appease him I suppose. Whether it was simply that farm activities or rural pursuits of any kind never interested him including riding or he was not allowed to take part - he was reputed to have had rheumatic fever ('*brushes the joints and scars the heart*') - or he simply wanted to spite his mother or Naldy was such a nasty bit of work and she was, or a combination of these factors, whatever the reason or reasons he never seemed to have taken much interest in her nor do I think did he learn to ride.

Somewhere I do have an old black and white photo of Naldy saddled up with Des astride her back. In this photo all too clearly Naldy is standing still, probably the way Des preferred her to be when in the saddle. I just don't see him galloping about with cowboy-like skill, daring and enthusiastic. It wasn't his style. Despite Des's lack of interest, Naldy was never sold and wandered the fields more or less ignored, useless, grazing and doing little else, no wonder she got fat. Until she got beyond it she had one use.

In the early forties still a functioning mare and in the mood,

she could conceive if taken for a tryst with a stallion; stallions seem to be always in the mood. By our time, she was considered too old to bear an annual foal. Her visits to the stallion had been reduced to once every second year.

Since every farm had at least one and most a pair of horses - two were needed for many jobs - one might think stallions were common. They were not. Horses are large, powerful, not always tractable or predictable animals, particularly if not treated consistently and well which sadly was all too often the case. Even if stronger than mares or geldings, stallions are less predictable in terms of their capacity to work. In thrall to their libidos they are the opposite, eminently predictable in terms of their response to the olfactory evidence of a mare in heat. When like bulls they get a whiff of that female ambrosia everything else is forgotten. It takes a strong man not to mind high walls and well kept fences to keep them in control.

For most farmers the stud fees were not high enough to justify keeping, feeding and caring for an unpredictable, sometimes dangerous stallion. Consequently considerable journeys might have to be undertaken to get a mare hot to trot to an obliging stallion. This was case in Willowbrook

Upstairs not only was the word sex never mentioned in our presence, even indirect sexual innuendo was unheard of or so subtly referred to, I at least did not catch on. Downstairs it was mostly not that different as the celibate clerical message concerning the sinfulness impurity and danger of sex had also deeply penetrated there and raunchy jokes or sexual innuendo was rare.

As evidence of this, even if only of an indirect variety when men swore (and it was almost exclusively men not women) and this they did frequently, Irish men were blasphemous not obscene. The very opposite was the case in irreligious, more sexually tolerant England of the same period; swearing there was nearly always of the obscene variety. Holy, Catholic, religious Ireland, rural anyway, was a verbally pure place in those days, bar the endless blasphemy of course.

At the same time if sex was never talked about upstairs and rarely downstairs, the sight and sound of copulating animals was not exactly rare in a setting where cattle, horses, donkeys, pigs, sheep, dogs, cats etc., were integral to the daily scene. Given this, despite the lack of any direct verbal references to sex of any kind, I suppose it was not that surprising when, on one occasion when Naldy was ready for a little action our Aunts encouraged us to go with Joe when he took her to the stallion. It got us out of their hair for a while; a welcome and deserved break.

The nearest available stallion was some distance away but exactly where I'm not sure now. I do remember we went in the pony and trap with Joe driving, moving only at a walking pace as fat little Naldy haltered and roped to the back of the trap, unused to anything but a leisurely stroll across a field, could only cover that distance at that pace. Not that we or Joe minded the slow pace in the least. It was a beautiful summer's day and if we enjoyed missing a day's lessons and sad to say we did, Joe no doubt also enjoyed a break from his usual daily grind. Naldy could go as slow as she liked as far we were all concerned.

On arrival at the farm of the stallion's owner, Joe led Naldy into his haggart. We were put sitting on top of the high ditch surrounding it. There, out of harm's way, we got a grandstand view of the proceedings.

Two men joined Joe and Naldy. After a bit of chat which we were too far away to hear, with his hand protected by a meal bag or a rag of some sort, one of the men went to a patch of stinging nettles in a corner of the haggart, pulled a bunch, walked back to 'Naldy,' lifted her tail, put the nettles crossways against her exposed perineum and clamping her tail firmly down against the nettles and held it there for a couple of minutes.

One would think this was at least unpleasant if not downright painful and she would buck and kick or do something to indicate discomfort but I can't remember reacting in any way that caused Joe, who held her head, any difficulties. I presume this was done to produce the reputed Spanish Fly effect on Naldy so she

might be more inclined to accept the none too gentle attentions of the probably under employed, much larger stallion.

The nettles removed, the other man went to get the stallion from his nearby stall. It was led out frothing at the mouth, ready for action or more correctly, given the fee his owner earned for his services, ready for work. Maybe the nettles did the trick or she was too tired or she was only too pleased to have his attentions, Naldy did nothing to resist. As is usual in these circumstances, foreplay was hardly a major part of the encounter. The stallion mounted, penetrated and with a few brief, efficient, businesslike thrusts, it was over. In no time we were on our way back to Willowbrook without even a cup of tea or a biscuit; no frills from that owner. Brief or not the stallion was a pro for a foal duly arrived on time some 11 months later.

Her foals were left with her for a year then caught, haltered, removed and sold. When this happened, poor old Naldy would be frantic for a few days. She got little sympathy. She soon settled and resumed her solitary, uneventful life

These visits went on until her fertility disappeared. Thereafter she continued to wander the fields idle, forgotten, forlorn, solitary, obese and shoeless, the front of her hooves gradually turning up more and more to form longer and longer horn like projections as the years went by, until she died at a great age for a horse, her absence hardly noticed.

Geese

In addition to hens, ducks, guinea fowl and turkeys, Aunt Margaret kept a gaggle of 15 or 20 geese. Though of the domestic variety, unlike other barnyard fowl, the geese tended to stick together in a fairly tight flock and wander beyond the farmyard to spend much of their time grazing in the fields around the house and beyond; and not just grazing.

Occasionally after much preparatory noisy cackling and esprit de corps rousing rah rah rahing, they would take off at a run and launch themselves into the air before landing again fifty or a hundred yards away.

Having landed, with necks outstretched, cackling vociferously, they would walk on and, before getting down to the eating and excreting cycle again, giving the impression they had to their satisfaction, demonstrated to whom it might concern, though partially domesticated, they still had a few of those wild genes in their genome yet plus enough chutzpah to use them and fly off if they so chose and you had better not push your luck with us or the next time we take off we might just keep on going.

Geese were allowed to wander around freely since they rarely went far, stuck together and their size, aggression and group behaviour rendered them less vulnerable than other fowl to local predators such as foxes, feral cats and hawks.

In addition, grazing like cattle, breakfast, dinner and tea not to mind endless snacks in between, were more plentiful out there in the fields than in the farmyard. That is not to say they were strictly grass eaters. It was by virtue of a fondness for grain that the second remembered incident occurred.

The first arose not from this predilection but from their propensity to wander occasionally taking them where they were not welcome. Usually the number of barriers, woods, fences, gates etc., kept the geese in the yard or in the fields behind the

house. Occasionally however, they found their way through and around these barriers and wound up on the front lawn.

From there they tended to head towards Aunt Margaret's flower garden separated from the lawn only by the avenue and two or three strands of strong wire, the topmost of which was about three feet from ground with a short steep slope behind. A barrier capable of keeping out cattle and horses but easily breached by geese. The garden and the geese did not mix well; at least from the point of view of the gardener.

One fine summer Sunday as we were about to head off in the pony-and-trap to mass in Millstreet, Aunt Margaret spotted her flock of geese in the vicinity of the garden and sent me to chase them away before we took off. This I did while they as usual, protested vociferously.

Having duly chased them down the lawn a bit I decided to finish the job off by throwing a few stones after them. My aim was too good, perfect in fact, for one flattish rounded smooth stone bounced off the top of a goose's head. It toppled over without a sound.

At the sight of their confrere instantly turned into a motionless bundle of feathers, the rest took off down the lawn protesting even more vociferously. At least I suppose the garden was safe for a while.

Nevertheless this hardly justified killing one. I was aghast, wondering at what Aunt Margaret's response would be if she found out and this, unless it recovered quickly and moved off, she was almost bound to do for we would pass within twenty or thirty feet of it shortly on our way to mass. In the hope it might recover before we went by on our way mass, I didn't confess my crime.

It hadn't and of course Aunt Margaret noticed and commented. To my relief none was directed at me. Again I said nothing. Already on the verge of being late for mass we kept going.

When we returned, an hour or two later, the goose was gone. Aunt Margaret thought a fox had got it. Once more I kept my

mouth shut, wisely as it turned out, for when the geese were counted later none was missing. I had only knocked it out. Deciding to hold my tongue had been a canny if dubiously moral decision.

For the best part of the decade from 1945 to 1955 we returned each year to Willowbrook for summer holidays. When 10 or 11 or so we pooled our money and with reluctant parental permission, bought a Webley .177 air pistol in Harrods in London and took it to Ireland on our summer holidays.

Accuracy with a hand gun of any kind is difficult, even harder with an air pistol of the spring loaded variety, as the compressed air spring powered mechanism produces a considerable jerk when the pistol is fired. None of us ever developed any great degree of accuracy.

Air pistols are useless, quite dangerous weapons the projectile (pellet) from which, though it has a much lower muzzle velocity than an explosive driven bullet still has considerable penetrating power at close range though it rapidly declines with distance and we were well aware of this. This is particularly true in the case of a small bore .177 pellet from an air pistol rather than an air rifle. However it turned out the range was greater than I expected.

By the time the threshing came around each year the geese had been grain starved for months. The first time and place grain became readily available each year was when the ricks of unthreshed wheat, oats and barley were in place in the haggart awaiting the services of Bill Twomey and his threshing machine.

The haggart was separated only by a barred gate designed to control the movements of large animals not the much smaller fowl, from the lower yard and easily breached by hungry determined birds almost all the way around.

In the year of this incident the weather must have been good for the unthreshed grain was dry enough to be left in the ricks unthreshed for longer than usual, with apparently little risk of it heating, rotting and thereby ruining the straw and grain. The presence of this unthreshed grain bearing straw became an

extended temptation to all the farmyard fowl geese included.

The damage the smaller birds could do was limited but geese are large birds strong enough to be able to drag out individual unthreshed stalks of straw from the bottom of the ricks to get at the grain. The drawback to this was not so much the grain they stole but the danger it posed to the stability of ricks. Their activity undercut the ricks to a point of possible partial collapse.

The only way to get rid of the geese was to chase them away whenever they appeared and they appeared frequently a job that more often than not fell to whichever one of us three happened to be to hand.

One way I discovered to make them go away without the necessity of having to chase them and that also provided an opportunity to make use of the air pistol, was to hop a few pellets off their large well feathered, protected bodies from a distance.

I presumed a pellet at that range would not penetrate their feathers or no more than enough to give them an unpleasant sting. It must have done for they all too obviously hated it, and began to move off when I hove in sight with the pistol, protesting loudly as ever. On one such occasion in the same spirit that had made me throw that last stone after the departing geese years before, I fired a parting shot at one of them hoping but not expecting to hit one on the body and thereby encourage them to keep moving

To my horror, as on that first occasion a goose - not the one I had aimed at this time mind you, but one a little further away and partially behind it - keeled silently over in an eerie replay of what had happened previously when I bounced a stone off one's head, even if the projectile used was different.

My immediate reaction was once again to be aghast followed by a furtive look around to see if anyone had seen what I had done. No-one it seemed had. However someone previously hidden behind a building might appear at any moment so, in order to conceal my guilt further, instead of going directly to the stricken goose I went around behind the haggart and came at the scene of my crime from the opposite direction.

When I examined the prostrate goose there was the pellet half buried in its temple. It was no mere KO this time; the goose was all too clearly dead and raw while my goose was alive and cooked or so I thought. Like most killers I fled the scene.

However older, with perhaps a more developed super-ego and sure the truth would come out anyway - the death dealing pellet was too clearly visible in the goose's head - after an hour or so of anguished reflection I confessed my crime to herself. Aunt Margaret's reaction was practical and immediate. She sent one of the men to cut its head and bleed it at once and later sent for 'Fordy' to come to pluck and gut it. We had it for lunch a day or so later. Once again I got off without even the reprimand I so richly deserved.

There was a sequel. Some little time later needing a hen for the pot, Aunt Margaret said with some asperity since we had demonstrated the effectiveness of the damn pistol we could now use it to kill a chicken for the pot. As the oldest this task fell to Dick.

Having failed to shoot a hen on the move, he eventually caught one and holding it by its neck fired at its head at point blank range. Whether it was the chicken's skull was made of sterner stuff than that of the goose or he didn't hit the right spot several attempts failed to kill the hen; au contraire, it squawked and struggled more than ever. At least he didn't shoot himself in the hand. I know he got the job done somehow but whether this was by ringing its neck or using an axe to decapitate it I can't recall.

There was another totally unrelated incident concerning the intrusion not of a goose this time but of a sow into Aunt Margaret's flower garden in front of the house that happened several years later that she related to me.

Like for the geese it was not easy for the pigs to find their way around the house to the garden. Occasionally a cute old sow would manage to do this, on one such occasion producing an interesting result.

My late first cousin and godmother Dr. Joan Kelly married

John Nunn an Englishman. They occasionally visited Willowbrook in the summer and stayed for a week or two. A former and I believe decorated, RAF war time pilot (or was it navigator?) he was a pleasant, if dour city man with no experience of farm life. On those all too rare fine sunny summer days, after lunch he liked to lie in the garden on a blanket and take a nap.

One day while taking his post-prandial doze with Aunt Marg sitting on her customary chair in the dining room window overlooking the garden, she noticed a sow had found its way into the garden and had quickly noticed his sleeping form. Inquisitive animals, always on the lookout for danger or a snack, the sow approached him cautiously sniffing until only a few inches from his face the noise of which probably woke him.

Without previous experience of pigs other than as a tasty confrere of his sausage and eggs for breakfast, she could see from her perch inside the window, he was alarmed to find this substantial animal looking him straight in the eye only a few inches from his face. Accepting apparently that at times anyway discretion is the better part of valour he hastily got up, gathered his things together and did what any sensible person would do in, an alien possibly dangerous circumstance he hastily retreated to the house not though without looking carefully around to see if anybody was watching. He failed to notice Aunt Marg inside the window looking out.

He clearly did not want to betray to his rural Irish in-laws that he, an Englishman and war veteran, was afraid of an animal that, even if large, might be harmless. If that turned out to true - which it was - and someone witnessed him in a disorderly retreat from a sow, what a loss of face.

She of course was far too polite and kind to rib him about it and only told me a good while later. What a great day for Ireland! An English war hero routed by an Irish sow. Beat that if you can.

A Note on Sus scrofa domesticus. Pigs are omnivorous scavengers and in those days were often left out to roam around freely to do just that. This not only cleaned a place up it helped feed them for free. To add to this their scavenging range they have powerful necks and snouts adapted for digging and use these to dig up worms and other underground insects and goodies.

Unfortunately this activity ruins the surface of fields for grazing animals and that was not tolerated. In order to allow them out but prevent them rooting up the soil they were ringed, a process that involved inserting a number of sharp ended, open, metal rings into the tips of their noses with a forceps designed for the purpose. So long as the rings stayed in place it largely prevented them from rooting in the ground, it was just too painful. As can be imagined this was not a painless process demonstrated by their screams of agony and desperate efforts to escape from the men ringing them.

Despite this and at times other occasional casual cruelties, it is surely not unfair to suggest the quality of their lives on most farms then was a lot better than those of their pig-farm reared latter day brethren.

Tinkers' Horses

Though it tends to be forgotten, there are still nomads in Europe. Gypsies in England, their distant cousin the Romanies in Continental Europe and in Ireland, unrelated to them there are what used to be called Tinkers now Travelling People. At some point 'Tinker,' goodness knows why, was judged to be a derogatory term. They, like the Romanies, seem to have an ancient provenance.

If the nomadic, largely illiterate Tinkers were despised by most of the settled majority, though not all, their colourful, wandering lives, appealed to children (I remember looking at them wistfully) and artists such as the painter Jack Yeats and the poet Patrick Kavanagh, who gave them a measure of lasting fame not only in Ireland but beyond.

A friend from University days was brought up on the outskirts of North Dublin. He had an uncle, a farmer who a mile or so away. In those car-less, phone-less, less neurotic, free and easy times, when young, he moved back and forth between his parents' and uncle's houses frequently. If he disappeared for a day or two his parents and his uncle assumed he was with the other.

One day on his way to his uncle's, he came across a band of Tinkers on the move with their usual cohort of domestic animals and children. An only child, he was delighted to play with the Tinker children and had so much fun he asked to go with them and they agreed. Given the family acceptance of his regular disappearances, neither his parents nor uncle were aware of anything different this time until they met at church that Sunday. It took the Gardai (the police) about two weeks to find him. Years later he still fondly recalled those days, maybe still does.

Years later, on a day with pockets of quite thick fog here and there along the road, my wife and I when returning to Dublin from Galway, gave a lift to a young New Zealand couple who

had acquired at home a great admiration for the paintings of Jack Yeats and had acquired in our somewhat jaded opinion an excessively romantic view of the Tinkers' often harsh, impoverished though certainly different lives.

While in the throes of this discussion we happened to pass through one of those foggy pockets, on a minor road in the midlands somewhere, when straight out of a Jack Yeats' painting, in front of us appeared a hatless Tinker on a piebald pony, riding bareback towards us at a wild gallop, his long red hair streaming behind him. In seconds he had passed by and melted into the fog behind us as quickly as he had appeared.

I don't know who was more stunned, the naïve New Zealanders or us. In all our years in Ireland neither of us had ever seen anything like it and never would again. Of course our attempts at puncturing their romantic bubble, was immediately completely discredited. Hadn't they seen with their eyes what the artist had put on canvas and poets in verse?

Tinkers usually travelled in bands of ten to twenty in horse-drawn, wild west style wagons (caravans) accompanied by a donkey or two, a few goats (usually tied together in pairs at the neck) and a dozen or so of loose, mostly piebald horses and ponies that travelled with the band. Often one or two more inclined perhaps to take off would be 'spancelled.' That is, on one side, the horses' front and hind legs were tied by a piece of rope. This allowed them to graze but only shuffle awkwardly along. They could not wander off.

The Tinkers, landless and nomadic as they were, their livestock had to survive mostly by grazing the sides of the roads and consequently were more often hungry than not. Their owners, well aware of this were not averse, particularly at night to opening a farm gate or take advantage of one accidentally left open, to drive or allow their hungry animals into a hayfield, out of sight of the landowner's house. As is easily imagined, such behaviour did nothing to endear them to farmers or to the men they employed most of whom too had a rooted dislike of the poor Tinkers.

This being the way it was, when early one morning one of Aunt Margaret's farm labourers found a dozen or so Tinkers' horses in one of her more distant fields, he drove them to the house and corralled them in the lower yard, the only place from which they could not break out

As children we had a number of wooden toys we played with in a corner of the lower yard underneath our bedroom window. Though large animals were usually kept out of that yard except horses under control, for safety initially we brought those in at night. At some juncture we made a conscious decision to stop doing this. What was the point?

On the morning after we made this decision and left the toys out for the first time, we were awakened early by the sounds of horses moving about uneasily in the yard. On looking out our bedroom window we saw a dozen or so milling around. It was the Tinkers' horses. By then the toys were already kindling.

Since during our roughly six years in Willowbrook this was the only time this happened, the odds against it were something in excess of 2,000 to 1.

This incident, minor though it may seem I have never forgotten. It taught me never to trust Lady Luck and that Murphy's Law held, '*If it can happen it probably will happen*.' That farm worker's zeal, the death knell of our toys was the birth of my abiding suspicion of the benevolence of fate, a suspicion sadly confirmed by events again and again.

Chapter 26

Significant Others

Dinny Cashman

Dinny was a big, red haired, powerful man with a sizable farm – a 'strong farmer.' Strong did not just mean physically strong though that was implied but vigorous, with money possibly but not necessarily in the bank, good land, good horses, cattle and other livestock; a farmer, that is, with a successful enterprise. He fathered a large brood of children and hoped, naturally enough, to get many years of work out of them before they fledged and flew the nest.

They lived 'up Tullig' on the Butter Road that came down a steep hill to join the Mallow to Millstreet road just beyond the creamery on the outskirts of the town. Under what circumstances I could have been there to see this I don't remember. Nevertheless there is this clear picture in my mind of seeing one of the boys aged no more than 12 or 13 standing up, reins in hand, coming down Tullig hill in a pony and cart at a wild gallop carrying the day's supply of milk in churns to the creamery, with several of his younger, also red haired, siblings clinging desperately to the ropes tying the swaying churns to the cart. This apparently was a daily performance. Amazingly, that I am aware of, none was ever killed or injured.

To Dinny's chagrin, his hopes for years of farmwork from his sons didn't quite work out as planned. On the contrary, several of his boys grew up to be 'wild' young men who avoided farmwork as much as they could, injured his horses and wrecked his farm carts. They must have cost him more than he made out of them. The most egregious injury he seems to have suffered at the hands of his children, occurred when two of the boys fled to England with a year's worth of his milk profits kept in hard cash concealed, but it seems not well enough, probably in or under his mattress. Since this incident took place around the

time two British diplomats, Burgess and MacLean, longtime Russian spies when warned their cover was about to be blown, caused a worldwide sensation by fleeing to Russia, Dinny's two boys were nicknamed the '*missing diplomats.*'

In his later years a local wag, pretending innocence but in reality to see what response he could provoke from him, said to Dinny rhetorically: "*You had a lot of children Dinny,*" leaving the unstated question floating in the air. After a long pause Dinny rose to the bait and by then an older, more experienced if not a wiser man, replied with resignation: "*I did. You need a share of 'em, there's terrible waishte in 'em.*"

'Jack Peter'

The Willowbrook avenue ended in a wrought iron gate and joined a dirt (unpaved/untarred) road that in turn ended at 'the cross' as it was called where it joined the 'tar (-macked/paved) road' to Millstreet in one direction and to Macroom and beyond in the other. On the way to the cross this dirt road cut through a number of farms that sloped towards the Finnow River that formed their south west boundaries.

On that road not far up from 'the Cross,' in a field just below the road, was a cattle shed with a rusty galvanised steel roof, the rear wall of which was the lower side of the road and the ditch on top of it such that it was easy to jump from the ditch onto the roof of the shed. Presumably like other local children this we at least once did.

The owners of that land and shed I believe had not lived there for some years and had let (leased) the land to neighbours. They employed a gentleman called 'Jack Peter' as caretaker. Jack apparently shared a pretty primitive cottage with a brother but whether they shared caretaking duties I don't know.

How good an eye he kept on the place I have no idea but he seemed to have a particular thing about children going onto the roof of this shed for he quickly appeared on the scene if they did waving his ash plant in the air and shouting: "*Hi yee! Hi*

yee! Get off my shed."

I have a vague recollection of being told the two brothers were embarrassing relatives of the owners who in return for keeping an eye on the place provided Jack and his brother with a cottage and enough money to stave off hunger but not much more, for my memory of Jack is of him being invariably dressed in ragged clothes and, like other old bachelors in the area, no great friend of soap and water.

It seemed the brothers did not get along that well at the best of times but with drink taken and, when they had the price they were both prone to take it, their disagreements occasionally went from words to blows.

On one occasion following such a violent incident Jack's brother laid charges against him and the case went to court. At some point in the trial his brother was asked to describe exactly what he was doing when Jack attacked him. The story went that he opened his court testimony by saying: "*I was down on the floor with a bone of mate* (meat)…"

'Fordy'

The Fords lived in a bungalow just up the road from 'Jack Peter's shed. Mr. Ford who had once worked in Willowbrook, somehow fell into the Finnow River one day and as might be expected got wet. Very wet it seems for he spent the rest of his fairly long life sitting beside the kitchen stove in their cottage trying to dry out.

Several of their children played musical instruments and sometimes we would hear one of them playing as we went by on the road. One of the girls I seem to recall married a well known Irish Scholar, musician and University Professor.

The youngest, Dave, was a minimum of a decade or so older than any of us. The other one I can recall by name was a good natured older brother Ned, already then too fond of the drink. Dave from time to time did odd jobs for Aunt Margaret. A cheerful young fellow he used to chase us around good naturedly

saying: "*I'm going to pull your little fellow*." Teasing and no more, he never did any such thing and I anyway never felt the least bit threatened. These days if we had told someone about this Dave would probably be arrested. Some years post war he bought an old Studebaker and moonlighted as an unlicensed taxi driver. Among other things he regularly took Aunt Margaret to mass on Sundays; 10 shillings the return trip. Dave was one of the family's musicians playing, among other instruments, the accordion.

Mrs. Ford, 'Fordy' to Aunt Margaret, was a lovely and, in her ability to endure, remarkable old lady. Despite being tiny she not only did all the traditional house work a poor wife with a large family routinely had to do, she also did most of her undryable husband's work too and when asked, hired herself out to do housework for others.

She came to Willowbrook intermittently to pluck yard fowl for the pot or help in the kitchen at threshings and that kind of thing. Apart from paying her for such jobs Aunt Margaret allowed her to collect any dead pieces of wood she found in the woods around Willowbrook. These 'Fordy' gathered into bundles (gwawyles) tied with a rope and carried home on her back. These gwawyles were so large compared to her small body that all that could be seen of her from behind as she carried them home were her little feet protruding below the moving bundle as she padded along. She must have carried as much or her back as she weighed.

Sometime in the late fifties not long after the Russians put the first satellite in space, while visiting my Aunt, 'Fordy' came to the house for some reason. She asked me if I had seen the 'shputnik' and what I thought of it. It so happened I had and told her so. No doubt I gave some banal answer to the second part of her question. She must have found neither my claim to have seen it nor my answer to the second part of her question convincing for she replied: "*Yirra, I don't think it's up there at all*."

For some reason Mrs. Ford had at one time stopped going to

mass on Sundays. Maybe the poor woman was just too exhausted by her endless work, to walk the mile plus to the church and back each Sunday or maybe she had lost her faith and had the rare courage to act on her lack of belief.

In the early forties one of her sons, Jack - the oldest and I think and her favourite - while perched on a branch of one Aunt Margaret's trees cutting another, fell and broke his back. I have a foggy memory of seeing people at a distance gathered around him on the ground. Taken away on a stretcher he never came home again. He died in a Cork hospital two years later. Since she could not afford the trip to that faraway Cork I don't think she ever saw him again. Ten years later she could have got there by car in forty minutes.

The popular belief was that Jack's accident and death were God's punishment for her failure to go to mass.

Another occasion when God was considered to have punished a person directly in this way was in quite different circumstances. Surprisingly, in that priest dominated community, the person considered so punished was a priest and no ordinary priest either but the Canon, the local head clerical honcho - O'Connor I think was his name.

A short, stocky, arrogant, man with a violent temper, one of the things that drove him into paroxysms of rage was the sight of a certain regular coterie of local men, who had a habit of hanging around outside the church door gossiping and smoking until the last moment before slouching into the back of the church, where they remained before leaving again as soon as possible. That is, they spent the minimum time in the church needed to avoid committing the mortal sin of missing mass. And in an illustration perhaps of Joyce's 'a logical absurdity' there were quite accurate legalistic points defining the technical mortal-sin-avoiding times towards the beginning and end of mass when it was considered the Sunday mass obligation had been completed and mortal sin avoided. Even if this was so it was considered an affront to good behaviour and the priest not to come to mass before the service started or leave before it had

finished.

I don't remember the technical last moment when one could come into the church to be judged theologically still on time but do remember the earliest time one could leave. The latter occurred when the priest said - in Latin - '*Ite, missa est*' ('*Go, mass is ended*') even though there were quite a number of remaining frills before it was actually ended they were essentially just that, 'frills' in that not being present for them did not automatically close the gates of heaven and open the gates of hell for you. No limbo for this sin, without confession it was straight to the eternal fire.

Canon O'Connor not only regularly denounced the men from the pulpit but on at least one occasion when we were there he came down from it, strode to the back of the church and punched a few. I thought it was one of the most exciting things ever to happen in mass. While relatively young he had a massive stroke and lost all power of speech. A direct act of God for this sacrilegious behaviour was the common view, a view to which Aunt Van subscribed.

Chapter 27

The Lorry (Truck)

The centrepiece of Aunt Margaret's flower garden in front of the house was a circular fountain of concrete construction. At its centre in the classic manner, was a round artificial little rock island with a water pipe sticking up from the centre with an attachment to produce a scattered spray. A circular flowerbed a yard or so wide surrounded the fountain. Outside that again a circular fringe of take-a-strong-man to-lift sized stones ringed this flower bed. The water supply being irregular the fountain was more off than on.

It must have been 1941 or '42 that our Aunts took us to Cork City by bus for a Christmas treat. There may have been repeat outings of the same kind in subsequent years but they have left no trace.

During the bus journey a motion sickened young girl vomited out the door of the moving bus, her regurgitated breakfast flew disgustingly past outside the window making me nauseous for a while. To my relief my insides settled and I avoided the same humiliating and, in hindsight, dangerous indignity. That and the bus conductor holding her from behind to prevent her falling out, remain firmly fixed in my memory.

When we got to Cork our Aunts immediately established headquarters for the day at the Imperial Hotel. The only other respectable Cork hostelry at the time was a temperance hotel owned by some severe variety of Protestant. Not by any stretch of the imagination problem drinkers, nevertheless the Aunts liked their lunchtime tipple on their rare day in the city and such was available at the Catholic owned Imperial only.

After they had established our HQ, sometime during that presumably busy day they took us to the toy department of I think Roche's Store on Patrick St. to chose a major Christmas present for ourselves - the cost probably to be reimbursed later by our parents in London. Dick, always the possessor of good

practical judgment, chose a large 42 shilling or two guineas (21 shillings) or £2. 2s - a lot of money in those days - functional wooden lorry, his choice wisely copied by Nick who could not have been more than four; the latter's must have been almost as big as he was.

In an attention seeking gesture not atypical of a second sibling, I chose something quite different even if almost as large, a model wooden steam engine but definitely cheaper, a sacrifice I most certainly wanted noticed. I have no memory if it was or was not. It was a choice I soon regretted, given that dragging the engine around with a piece of rope tied to the front while I made engine noises just about drained its limited repertoire; not so the lorries.

These could be used again and again taking things here and there and everywhere. We even pioneered a bog road of sorts, in practice a cow path with a few adjustments, to a corner of the 'Clochar' where there was a small turf bank. There, as was the usual pattern of our play, we copied what we had seen the farm workers do at their various tasks. In this instance we cut a few sods of turf and went through the full ritual of drying and stacking them. And when the turf was dry we loaded it onto the lorries and dragged them along our bog road to the house, a hilly, half kilometre or so away. I suppose the total produced hardly kept the dining room fire going for more than half a day; still it was something and kept us out of mischief.

To resemble further the adult world of horse carts and later turf lorries Dick, always good with his hands, made high, removable wooden railings for his and I think Nick's lorries to increase their carrying capacity. Given the paucity of tools available and the absence of an instructor this was no small achievement for a boy of nine or ten

A year or two later, regretting my earlier decision I asked for and got a lorry of similar size even if of a different design, for a birthday or perhaps Christmas present. It was too late. By then lorries were largely passé with us; familiarity breeding a degree of disinterest if not contempt.

Nevertheless though I have no specific memory of doing anything specific with this lorry, like hauling turf from the bog as we had done with the others, I do remember it was my most important toy and played with it intermittently. It definitely meant something to me.

This being the case when one dull cool late autumn day with winter drawing in, on looking out the dining room window I saw my lorry lying partially on its side against one of the rocks surrounding the fountain like an abandoned old car in a ditch somewhere, I was oddly moved. For some reason this banal little scene left not only a visual memory of eidetic clarity but a clear memory of the emotions I experienced.

It was the first time I became aware not so much of the cold fact of the temporary nature of our sojourn in Willowbrook - something we had already rightly been made aware of - but also to appreciate even if only in a primitive way, the inevitable personal consequences, that in the not too distant future I would have to leave behind this flawed Eden but the only Eden I knew and of my helplessness and inability to do anything about it.

I didn't go out at once to rescue the lorry. I knew it wouldn't change anything.

Departures

During those years Nick and I experienced two significant departures. The first was that of Dick to Presentation College, Bray as a boarder in 1943 or 1944 and the second ours from Willowbrook to London in November 1945

Unlike the second I have no specific memories of the first other than a vague one of watching the back of a car with Dick in it, disappearing down the avenue presumably to the station to catch the train to Dublin.

Yet his going must have been a source of some turmoil. Not only did it reduce the number of our cohesive but at times contentious sibship by a third but two and a half years older, bigger and more sensible, he was undisputed leader.

I suppose I must have been somewhat ambivalent about it. After all, with his departure according to accepted theoretical rules of succession I became the new Leader, Fuehrer, Taoiseach.

In practice whether I indulged in this fantasy or not and from this distance I can't say one way or the other. I certainly have no memory of my putative underling Nick, ever showing any practical signs of recognising or giving substance to such a power fantasy even if I had one. His position bolstered I suppose by the fact that though eighteen months younger he was almost as big and power as Mao Tse Tung put it, comes out of the barrel of a gun or its metaphorical equivalent.

What had changed was that apart from brief occasional visits from cousins and with the total absence of same age friends, more than ever, we were thrown solely on each other's company; a difficult, unnatural, unhealthy situation and one that has had lifelong consequences; not all necessarily adverse. It did teach us at an early age to be able to, as Seneca put it: '*linger in our own company'* for longer than most people without feeling as bothered as many might be.

In contrast I remember quite a lot about our departure from Willowbrook in November 1945 though by no means everything. For instance, I have no memory of being told of the date of our departure or who broke the news to us but do recall an anticipatory mixture of excitement and foreboding.

As that day drew near the latter predominated. I remember Nick and I (Dick was away at boarding school) walked around the farm on our last day making a farewell visit to each well known field. Associated with this is the memory of running through a rain wetted almost ripe, uncut grain crop and getting soaked. This though must be a memory distortion, an amalgam of different occasions. We did run through such a crop and got wet on one occasion but it could not have been then. By November standing grain crops would have long since disappeared from the fields.

On the quay in Cork waiting to board the boat (The Innisfallen), I wept profusely, greatly distressed at parting from Aunt Margaret and I suppose the whole Willowbrook shtick for the first time in my conscious life. I don't think the acute distress lasted that long for we were soon, in the company of Aunt Van, absorbed in the drawn-out complexities of boarding, going through customs and passport checks - being just post-war these were detailed and time consuming - before starting the first leg of our two part journey, the first by boat to Fishguard Harbour in South West Wales, the second by train to London.

After boarding the Innisfallen on that November day, Aunt Van asked a deckhand what sort of crossing we were likely to have. He looked at the lowering skies over the River Lee ahead and said it was going to be rough. He was right. She vomited three times, me twice and Nick once. Never seasick since, I have not forgotten how horrible it was.

In later years on return journeys to Ireland by the same route, presumably because the Innisfallen sailed for Cork late at night and the time of the arrival of train matched it, to remind sleepy or to awaken sleeping passengers they were nearly at the end of the train journey, at the last station before Fishguard a uniformed

porter walked along the platform beside the train repeating over and over again: "*Next stop Fishguardabbah, next stop Fishguardabbah, next stop…..*"

The train from Fishguard to London passed through South Wales, much of the South of England and it being only months after the end of WW2 one might think the scene outside the train window would have left vivid impressions for it was all new to me. This was not the case; it left none or at least not until we neared the end of the journey.

I do remember the train never went other than slowly and there were frequent stops, probably because of bomb damage to the rail bed. To add to this the services available were anything but luxurious, even drinking water was hard to get. At some point Aunt Van did manage to get a pot of tea from someone but that turned out to be so strong not only Nick and me but she found it undrinkable. In terms of eating and drinking that was it.

Bar the too strong tea and the scarcity of water, my clearest memory is of chugging slowly through smoggy London on the last leg of the journey and Aunt Van trying to point out Buckingham Palace. I may have said I could see it but in fact couldn't make it out in the seemingly endless sea of houses stretching to the coal smoke haze limited horizon. I had never seen so many houses.

Apart from the general one of having to adjust to a whole new situation there were probably several specific shocks though only one still remains vividly with me.

As previously mentioned, having left London so young I had no memories of our house there or of London and was quite unprepared for the reality of city living, particularly in regards to space.

In Willowbrook the only space limitations were those imposed by the pretty vague, often avoidable strictures, half heartedly imposed by of our Aunts, or the necessity of appearing for meals, bedtime, 'lessons' and the like or the personal fears and physical limitations of childhood. We thought nothing of taking off on our own, climbing stone ditches, rambling across

neighbours' fields, crossing the rocky often flooded stream below the house or the quite substantial Finnow River into which that stream flowed, when the water level was in our flexible judgment not too high or the stream too strong.

That we had unlimited space was a given. The idea that it would be limited, very limited never crossed my childish mind anymore than it had crossed my mind that air might get scarce or the weather and seasons remain unchanged. Even as we chugged slowly through London and sight of all the houses packed closely together was impossible to miss, the penny didn't drop.

Arriving at night the reality still did not strike home until the following morning when I was led through my mother's greenhouse and shown our tiny brick walled garden and it hit me for the first time that from then on this was all the outdoor space to which I had free, unsupervised access.

It was a dreadful heart stopping, blood chilling moment, remembered with absolute clarity. I firmly believed I would be not be able to adjust to such a degree of confinement, could not survive that, like a wild bird confined to a cage I would wither away and die.

I didn't die of course. I soon got used to this space limitation, this relatively speaking virtual imprisonment, though never learnt to like it. Those early country years left me with a lifelong preference for farmland or unregulated space around me. To this day city parks and other types of humanly designed spaces even flower gardens, leave me cold. The only form of space drastically changed by human activity that pleases me now is farmland, particularly the sight of a stony field on the side of a mountain with a few cattle, sheep and a horse or two in it; now there's a scene that still warms my heart.

On a different tack it is scarcely a coincidence that I and my brothers independently all chose to build and live in houses where the land slopes away in front and we can see some considerable distance. At the same time all three settings have their limitations, among them no mountains in the background, Derrynasaggart or otherwise.

Lost and Found

Crower back band gowlogue
Straddle spancel sulook scrow
Haggart kippens headland tackling
Skirthawn pisawn shlawn shkilawn
Bogdale jinnett lavings float
Belly-band and falling ground
    Remember the tumbling paddy lads
    Remember the tumbling paddy

Angish traces kithogue bahn
Pissmires bogdale cob sugawn
Britchen headland the AhBC
Binding pig-rings hames the pip
Turfbruss heck-up hould-up
Gwayle butt and Buchalawns
    Remember the tumbling paddy lads
    Remember the tumbling paddy

Bytes upload download chips
Software hardware spam high-speed
Email youtube twitter facebook
Broadband virus firewall
Format laser web hyperlink
Apple RIM and microsoft
    Tumbling paddy what's that?

Jim O'Brien

Willowbrook Pomeroy Family Tree
(Partial)

Richard Pomeroy b.1615….m ???. had
Richard Pomeroy b 1660….m ???. had
Richard Pomeroy b. 1745…m ???. had
Henry Robert Pomeroy (acquired Clara (more) 1787
Richard Pomeroy b. ? d. 1852
m. Mary Dunne in1798
Thomas Pomeroy 1814 - 1883 m. Mary Kelleher
Richard Pomeroy 1857 - 1935 m. Julia Ann Hegarty
b. ? d.1937

Bernard	**Jerome**	**Margaret**	**Eileen**	**Nicholas**
1888 - 1937	1890 - 1975	1894 - 1987	1895 - 1973	1897 -1984

Mary	**Thomas**	**William**	**Angela**
1899-1983	1900-1922	1903 - 1887	1904 - 1987

Bernard m. ??? wife d. c1943; issue: Mary Angela & Stella (all deceased)

Jerome m. Mildred O'Neil d. 1969; no issue

Margaret unmarried; no issue

Eileen m. Dr. Kelly d. c.1925; issue: Joan & Desmond (both deceased)

Nicholas m Monica Burton d. 1987; issue: Judy & Richard (deceased)

Mary m. Richard O'Brien d.1980; issue: Richard Pomeroy, James Vincent & Nicholas Henry

Thomas unmarried; no issue

William m. Marie Lawton d. c.2000; issue: Richard, Jack, Sheila, Thomas & Robert

Angela m. John Cronin d. c1959; no issue

Nicholas Pomeroy the CSA veteran was a first cousin of Richard Pomeroy later of Willowbrook.

Charming Miss Kenneally
(and her suitors)

by

Jack Kelleher/Jack 'Maag Horan'/Jack 'the Bard'

I'll take a view of the country true
While I'm young and airy
If you'll be my bride and be Mrs. Hyde
Instead of Miss Kenneally

There is a Hare on track in Curragh back
Of that I found out lately
'Twould be better for him stay in his seat of hay
Than be watching Miss Kenneally

Here comes Jer Mick, stout and thick
And he goes back there daily
To win from Hyde his love and pride
The charming Miss Kenneally

Riordan's Frank comes next in rank
He laughs and smiles so gaily
For he knew by fame, he'd win the dame
This charming Miss Kenneally

Thade Mullane from yonder Glen
Is watching late and early
With a bullán stick the boys to lick
Who're watching Miss Kenneally

Herlihy Dan spoke out again
Saying: "*Blast ye, what ails ye*
There are good men in the Curragh Glen
But I'll have Miss Kenneally."

Healy Dan is a fine young man
He goes down by Ballydaly
He went to sleep with a horny sheep
And thought 'twas Miss Kenneally

And last of all from Adrivale
Ger Corkery is now going crazy
His lips in a twist to get one kiss
From charming Miss Kenneally

Oh, I'll ne'er go back to that Glen again
For fear those eight young men would find me
For Kenneally had a big black dog
And his name is 'Towser'
They set him from behind the fence
And he tore the arse of my trousers.

(Thanks to **Jerry Riordan**, Ballinatona, Millstreet,
for providing these verses. **Jack Lane**)

About the author

Jim O'Brien, was born in London in 1936. In 1939 he and his brothers were evacuated to Ireland for the six years of WW2. They returned to London 1945.

Privately tutored in Ireland he did not go to school until he returned to England. In September 1946 he started his not unhappy eight years boarding school education in England. Among his classmates in his first school was Michael Gogarty a fellow Arsenal supporter and grandson of Dr. Oliver St. John Gogarty, James Joyce's role model for the "*Stately plump Buck Mulligan*." The second school was Beaumont College in Old Windsor, a minor Public School. Among that school's old boys were Edward Martyn, landlord, Abbey playwright and the first President of Sinn Féin, Dr. Noel Browne radical left-wing politician of the 1940s and 50s and Gerald Sweetman, Fine Gael cabinet minister.

After leaving school he went to Trinity College Dublin to study medicine and qualified in 1961.

He first emigrated to Canada in 1965 with his wife and child. Following two locums in Manitoba he went into full time solo general practice in the Yukon for a year. A personal tragedy persuaded him and his wife to avoid another Yukon winter. He finished up four time zones away as a general practitioner for a further two years in Nova Scotia.

He returned to Ireland in 1970. Almost by chance in 1972, he became a psychiatric registrar in St. Brendan's (mental) Hospital in Dublin. In 1975 he re-emigrated to Nova Scotia and continuing his psychiatric studies, obtained a Canadian Fellowship in Psychiatry (FRCPC) in 1979. He remained active in the Psychiatric field until he retired in 2003.

He lives in Nova Scotia and is married to Heather Laskey co-author of among other things '*Children of the Poor Clare's - the Story of an Irish Orphanage*'. He has three children and two grandchildren.

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