

# THE FAIRGREEN

by David Hanly

**I**'ll tell you first about the trees. Not because they have much to do with this memoir, but because they were there once, and now they're gone, and I would like to bring them back to mind, however briefly. I don't remember how many there were: perhaps a dozen. They stood along the bank of the reservoir (which we, in our brusquely unFrenchified way, called The Tank) directly across from the back window of the house at 13, Fairgreen, where I was born. In summer, they were heavy in leaf, in winter stark sentinels against the night sky, the moonlight filtering through the black

network of the branches. And when there was wind and rain, I remember their sighing, and it seemed to my seven-year-old mind that they envied me my warm bed and wished the same comfort for themselves. I felt sorry for them, and wished I could bring them into my cot and keep them warm and dry.

Very young, very innocent, very unselfish thoughts in which not even the Redemptorists could divine sin. But you never knew with the Redemptorists. Anyway, I never confessed my arboreal

perversion, and remained unchastised.

The Tank itself was the site of the old gallows where many a wretch hung high for paltry theft. Gerald Griffin immortalized the area in his fine and neglected novel, **The Collegians**, insofar as it gave "local habitation and a name" to his story. I heard mention of "Gallows Green", but my young mind heard the single word, Gallusgreen, and the word sounded pleasant and free of deadly undertones.

For all my purblind ignorance of the rich history of the Fairgreen, it was a good place to be born. Between the back of the house and The Tank, there was, and still is, plenty of wide open field. Of course, it's the kind of pasture that makes visiting Dutchmen weep in anguish. Every year, there was a rich



Old Garryowen, with the Fairgreen and its trees in the background.

crop of thistle and ragwort and, on the margins, small scented forest nettles through which, Nureyev-lithe, we tiptoed in tackies to retrieve a ball. No amount of gracious side-stepping protected skinny little legs from the malignant needles, and the dock-leaf, that sacred panacea, seemed never to work, even when applied in bed, when the stings came virulently alive.

The nettles were not the only silent enemies lurking in this providential amenity. The cattle came very near to nuzzle for grass among the ragwort and thistle, and they left their dung-pats like land-mines in the thick grass. For as long as you were wearing your worst clothes, you were safe: it wasn't until Sunday morning, when you were scrubbed and sweet-smelling in things fresh and ironed, that your foot found one of these islands of goo. The sandal sank in with a sickening shluck, slid on across the grass, and your new pants slapped down into the hot, dark-green mass. The moisture of dung invaded and ruined, and the tears of anticipation started to well. Ah yes.

At the bottom of the Green was the site of the Munster Fair, once a great occasion, but even in the late fifties becoming a thin enough affair. At the top was "The Quarry", though God knows how long it was since quarrying had been done there. Nevertheless, its steep sides and arbitrary undulations and undergrowth provided us with a perfect simulacrum of The West: here were gulches, arroyos, cliffs and canyons, and here we became Geronimo, Cochise, Billy the Kid, Hopalong Cassidy and The Lone Ranger. (The Lone Ranger always presented a problem: he was, of course, the first **liberal** cowboy, sharing his beans with a redskin, but very few of us were prepared both to play second fiddle **and** confine our exclamations to "Kemo sabav".)

Finally, there was the cemetery, small, unruly and overcrowded, a constant reminder of final things. So, there was room for the young to get out and stretch themselves and create their own environment of adventure from things natural and arbitrary and sometimes dangerous: observing the controlled and safe and anaemic playgrounds of Dublin today, I cannot help thinking that there's a greater wealth of fun for children in one abandoned Bedford van than in all the planned playgrounds provided by an enlightened municipality.

But fields and fairs and tanks do not constitute a community, and the people of the Fairgreen were certainly a community.

The definition of community remains elusive, not to say illusive. Remembering now - with that near-perfect clarity that marks many memories of childhood - the make-up of the Fairgreen community, I'm struck

by the truly incredible mixture of people.

There are, after all, only seventy-five houses in the Fairgreen, and they were built with that sublime indifference to people's needs that marked - and still marks - municipal house construction for the working classes. If closeness is an index of community spirit, then the people of the Fairgreen had community spirit thrust upon them, for so close were they together, it was nearly impossible for anyone to have any kind of privacy. **Nearly** impossible. Some people remained private, as some people all over the world remain private.

There were carpenters and handymen and butchers and a large number of CIE workers - drivers and conductors and locomen. There were widows and deserted wives, rearing their families against intimidating odds. There were people who drank when they had money and people who never touched a drop, and there were controlled alcoholics who exploded into noisy inebriation on weekends and lapsed into taciturn silence from Monday to Friday. And there was a fascinating sprinkling of the unexpected: a monumental sculptor who was also a renowned piper; a buttermaker, a pig-buyer, a gardener, a lock-keeper, two cobblers, an insurance man and a fair number of humble clerks. And there was one Frenchman.

What bound these people into a community is difficult to say. Their togetherness found expression in public ritual, as when the Marian Shrine was built at the top of the road and became the site of evening vigils, or when the ill-fated An Tostal was introduced to make everyone happy for a week: it turned into a kind of Mardi Gras with rain. The Fairgreen community, as it existed in the 40s and 50s may perhaps be the subject of a further memoir (the big problem with memoirs is libel), but for the moment, some small memories.

The first is of my uncle John Sheerin, may he rest in peace. He was known as "Daw", and after a few drinks he became outrageously generous, and if you caught him at the right time coming up the Green he would thrust a full thruppence into your hand. But he also had a fine capitalist's notion that money should be **earned**, and one day he decided that I should earn my thruppence by fighting (and, of course, vanquishing) another young boy, whom we shall call Paul.

The problem was that Paul was a fearless, pug-nosed brat, whereas I was a skinny little coward, and I slunk away from the challenge. My uncle, mortified, caught me by the collar and britches, lifted me off the ground, and flung me on top of peerless Paul, who immediately started to beat me to pulp.

My uncle, all sensitivity, walked away in disgust. Such casual humiliations are the perfect preparation for the big bad world waiting to ambush the uninitiated.

The most traumatic experience in the Fairgreen happened in the small park at the top of the road, where one day I crouched to retrieve a ball from between the legs of a horse. The horse's hoof crashed into my face, splitting gums and spraying teeth, and I was carried down the road on the back of Joe Slattery, choking on the blood. Bill Shea, may he also rest in peace, drove me to Barrington's in his Ford Prefect, while Nell Byrnes soaked towel after towel in the blood that flowed like a fountain. The whole business made me a hero, and the misfortune was the talk of the road for a long time after. It's probably reasonable to say that misfortune is what truly binds communities: more often than not, good fortune provokes nothing more noble than envy.

The most powerful memory of all has nothing to do with misfortune, and is devoid of drama, but it is the memory which most frequently recurs in my mind, probably for the sheer simplicity of the image. It was Halloween, which we knew as Snapapple Night, and I was seven years old. My father, who had a perfect sense of what children needed for enjoyment, always made much of this night, though in a simple manner: apples, nuts and a few sweets were the fare, but the real enjoyment came from diving for pennies in a white enamel basin. Every night he cycled home between half-five and six, and on this night I had a strange premonition that something would go wrong. At dusk I perched myself on the railings outside Carrolls' house, so that I had a perfect view of everyone as they arrived under the light outside Moloney's. I sat in the crepuscular gloom, eyes fixed, in a perfect reverie of anticipation. One by one, the men came home from work, the lights of their bicycles appearing first as tiny dots, and, when they reached Moloney's light, each one was revealed to be someone else's father.

By six o'clock every father in the Fairgreen had come home, wheeled their bicycles into their hallways, and the doors had shut behind them. I sat on, cold and rigid, a painful disappointment spreading through me like a chill. Then a little bobbing dot of light appeared, and grew larger, and man and bicycle loomed under Moloney's light, the familiar hat, the heavy crombie, the gloveless hands, and, perched on the handlebars, bulky brown bags and packages. I leaped from the railings and ran alongside, speechless with gratitude, and now, thirty years later, for the first time, I thank my father, for being always dependable, always generous, always thoughtful. Always there.