CHILDHOOD HOLIDAYS

BY DESMOND O'GRADY

In the modern explanation of an old-fashioned feeling, I believe we are each of us born and grow up with a particular sense of identification with one of the four elements: earth, water, fire or air. This matures with us until we prefer land, sea, sun or wind. My affinity is with water, the sea. My earliest memory of nature is of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Clare.

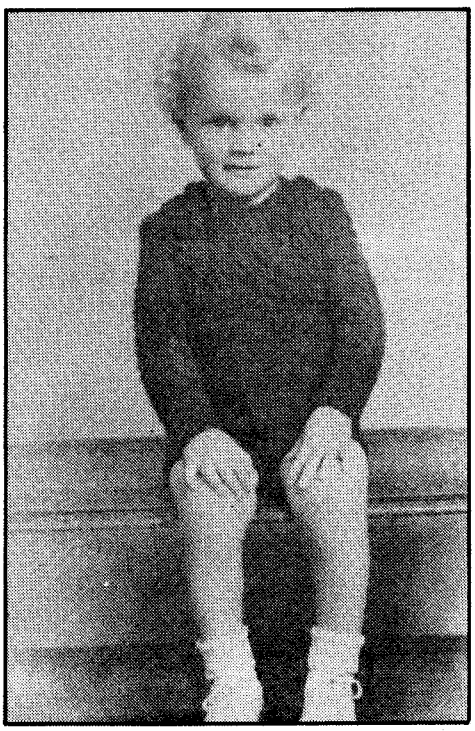
KILKEE

Because I was born and reared in Limerick City, my family's summer resort was Victorian Kilkee on the Clare coast. We went there on the historic, narrow-gauge West Clare Railway. Trundling along all day, we stopped at many small farmhouses on the line to deliver or collect messages from or for the city. When we arrived train-tired at Kilkee, the station-master, big Michael Tynan, welcomed us. Kilkee was said to have 'the finest bathing facilities in Ireland.' We took a cottage there.

My earliest memories are pre-Second World War: paddling with my nanny Maude in the wavelets on the strand, and bawling my head off because I couldn't go out to father standing in the big breakers with the straps of his swimming togs over his shoulders. We babies were undressed with the ladies in the big, dark-blue wooden bathing-boxes on the strand, with their rusty cast-iron wheels. Inside, they smelled of seaweed. Sometimes these bathing-boxes were pulled by old, hairy donkeys down to the sea's edge, where their steps were lowered into the water so that mothers and grandmothers could descend into the shallows carrying screaming children in their arms. Sometimes I got a ride on a resigned donkey's back, holding on for dear life to fistfuls of matted hair. Of course, there were little sand-buckets and shovels and the building of sand castles. But everybody had those and did that. What fascinated me, standing there, seemingly alone and small, was the view and immensity of the vast, surging sea that stretched way out of sight at evening to where the sun sank. Fifty years later, I'm showing my infant grandaughter the same wonder.

During the War years, my strongest memory is not of the sun-scorched daytime, but of the hushed, late, long evenings, when the sun seemed never to set, crouched around the wireless with the grownups. As we listened to accounts of the War on the airwaves, you could hear it all: the maniac gunfire and bombing in the static as the wireless knobs were gingerly turned and tuned and the grownups crouched and craned to hear Churchill and Lord Haw-Haw.

My nanny Maude had lived in Coventry and was anxious for her relatives there. I also had six first cousins fighting in the Army, the Navy and the Airforce. Father and my Uncle Feathereye followed the progress of the War on a great map on the wall and moved little coloured flag-pins. They told me that when the Germans occupied Ireland, Mother and Maude and I would sail from Kilkee to safety in America, while they would stay to fight with my cousins. When the War on the wireless was over, I went to bed and sleep, fantasizing bombers in the starry sky overhead and submarines under the phosphorescent sea outside.



A childhood picture of Desmond O'Grady.

Of course, during the War, there were no children's toys, unless you inherited your mother's and father's or got gift parcels from America. I think this lack of toys played an important part in the formation, growth and development of our creative childhood imaginations. I made up my games from the stories told and read to me at home. Toy deprivation and the creative imagination of War children who became artists and writers would, I'm sure, make a fascinating study.

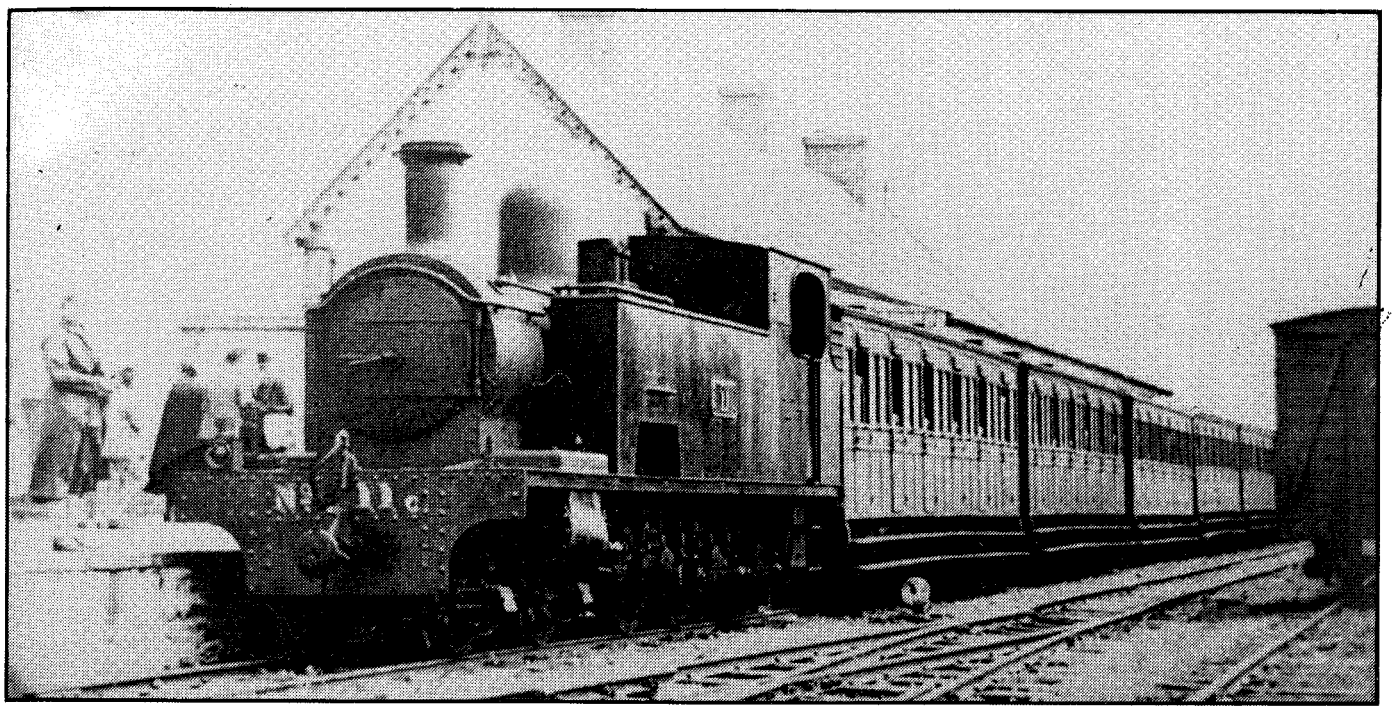
Daytime Kilkee was a different experience by then too. There were boat trips to see the tunnel and the caves at George's Head, seaside walks to watch the fishermen shove out their sleek, slug-black currachs from the boat-house pier to fish. And then there were hours spent chewing salty seaweed and winkling with a pin the salty worms out of periwinkles bought from the baskets and buckets of the shawly wives and daughters of the fishermen.

After the War, when I was old enough to swim and go off with school friends from Limerick, the Pollock Holes were a favourite morning meeting place for the boys. Out at the West End, the Pollock Holes were large, natural pools in the rock reef, encrusting into the bay, that were revealed and accessible when the tide went out. Here the men swam naked in privacy. One regular morning bather we called 'Moneybags'.

Moneybags was a 'returned Yank' and had, literally, bags of money. Daily he came to the Pollock Holes for his swim, and he always brought a bag of small change with him. Sitting on the rocks by the swimming-hole, he would throw shiny six or threepenny pieces into the pool for us small boys to dive after. What we caught we could keep. He was a retired, elderly gentleman, and had a short time before returned from America, where he had 'made his fortune'. He dressed impeccably: white leather shoes, white summer jacket and slacks, a tie and a small straw hat. He never undressed or swam while we boys were there flopping into the water after his money. He took his swim when the bag was empty and we had gone home for lunch. One day, some boys plotted to play a prank on him.

Flush with his change for ice-cream, we boys had left for lunch and Moneybags was having his dip alone in peace and privacy. He didn't notice the scallywags creeping back over the rocks and taking his towel and clothes - everything except his hat. The boys brought the clothes to his hotel and gave them to the porter and then told all the young girls the secret. Poor Moneybags had no alternative but to walk the embarrassing stretch of public road back to his room stark naked - an extraordinary event and sight in Ireland even today.

Undaunted, brave little Moneybags strode proudly and purposefully along the promenade to his hotel with nothing to cover his nakedness but his little straw hat. Of course, all we schoolboys and girls were sitting along the sea wall awaiting his advent. The Laurel Hill girls had never seen a man so naked before and giggled uncontrollably as he came abreast, while the Jesuit boys whistled, shouted and laughed as if at a rugby match. Without stopping, but keeping his head held high, Moneybags snapped disapprovingly 'If you were gentlemen you wouldn't make such a show of yourselves.' One scallywag, possibly Harris, fired back, 'And if you were a gentleman



Kilkee Railway Station in the 1930s.

you'd raise your hat to the ladies'. Kilkee was grownups, the War, others in relation to others: dramatic experience.

COOLEA

My first summer away alone from home and family I was sent to Coolea on the Cork-Kerry border to live with a family and speak nothing but Irish. Father believed in learning languages well and where they were spoken. At that time, Coolea was only a crossroads scatter of cottages, a pub, shop, a church and a schoolhouse. We spoke Irish all day. I enjoyed that. I was another person living in another imagination, an imagination of gorse-covered hills peopled with sheep and goats for bucking broncos, of massive mountains half-hidden in cloud and circled by folkloric eagles and chicken-hunting hawks. It was a closed world, different to the world of the open sea.

By day, we boys rambled the hills, played bullfighter with the wild goats and I learned to tickle trout in the streams. You lay on your belly on the bank, face hidden in the grass enough to not frighten the alert trout with any excited move of your head. Then you crawled along Indian-style until you spied a trout trembling in the sunlit shallows. You slid your hand and forearm into the spangling-in-sunshine water and inched up behind the twitching tail of the unsuspecting sleepy trout. Then, as surreptitiously as a seducer, you slipped your fingers under the belly of the fish until you imperceptibly touched the soft tummy, then tickled as teasingly as the slipstream until you felt you had the fish's settled, relaxed trust. Then, suddenly, with a jerk, you then whipped smartly up onto the bank. Of course, some got away.

The day's catch made for a fulsome treat of a family supper when you plodded proudly home, your fresh fish held high in your little fist. Coolea was myself in relation to myself: lyric experience.

DUNDALK

Some years, in spring, I would have a holiday with my aunt in Blackrock, the seaside resort of Dundalk town. Here the tide went out for miles, and the grooms from the stables exercised their horses on the wet but firm sand. I learned to ride a little there and it was a new experience to canter, even gallop, into the rising morning sun as far as the receeded sea's edge, a different sea to that of Clare because of the fastness of the bay. But one day, my neighbour pal Vincent Murphy introduced a new adventure. Birdnesting.

We turned our backs to the sea and traipsed the countryside tracking birds' nests. This was a new dimension of healthy self-occupation for a city boy. And there were strict rules: never touch a nest with your hand; never take more than one egg from any nest, and none if the hen had not yet laid her normal number (then you noted the location of the nest for return visit); never disturb a sitting hen, and so on. So we set off to climb trees, peer under bushes, creep into cowsheds, haybarns, farm outhouses, churchyards and old ruins looking for birds' nests and their eggs.

Steeling and straining your nerves to climb to the windy topmost branch of a rookery while a mafia of crows cackled machinegun murder around your head; the risky reach over the awkwardly stuck- together knitting needles of the nest to sense the presence of eggs by the heat on your palm; the picking out of one egg without touching or disturbing the others; the dextrous descent without breaking a twig or scratching your nose or crushing the egg - that pumped pure adrenalin to the brain. A giddy galavant, I tell you. The getting in under a thicket of thorny bush to a williwagtail's nest the size of your fist to flinch with your pickers and stealers like a pickpocket through the thorn-protected doorhole no wider than your two fingers an egg the size of the nail on your little finger was as delicate an operation as, later a young lover, removing grandmother's earrings from a girl's lobes, or a surgeon removing a tiny tumour from a living brain. To clamber like a steeplejack up to the roof of a high haybarn or swing rhythmically, arm over arm, along the rafters of a cowhouse to get at the nests of swifts and swallows, the demented birds screaming in flight about your face; the grip in the groin as you hung by one hand while the other extracted the egg from the scrotum of dried dung and mud nest without disturbing a cowhair of bedding was as deliberate an operation as a specialised jeweller removing and resetting precious stones in a priceless heirloom. Later, the cleaning of each fragile egg: a pinprick at each polarcap, a whispered blowing or sucking out of white and yoke until the egg was so clean you could see your torchlight through the shell unless it was a disappointing glugger with a chick and broke between your fingers. Then the careful placing of each precious piece in place in its bed of fine sawdust of cotton wool, marked with their names on a tiny card, in your drawer. Picking and placing words in a poem. Birdnesting was me in relation to others: epic experience with a touch of the lyric and a dash of the dramatic thrown in.

The day came one such visit to Blackrock, no longer an adventurous boy but an adolescent, when I met a girl my own age who played Bach, Beethoven and Brahms on the piano. I fell in love and wrote my first poems. I still write poems here overlooking the Atlantic.