

# DAINGEAN DAYS

PART ONE

By Sean Bourke

**I**t was a cold October morning in 1947. Mr. Justice Gleeson gazed down from his lofty perch on the judicial bench at the three cold, hungry and ragged boys standing huddled together in the well of the court. He spoke to the other two first and there seemed to be some confusion about which of us had done what. I hadn't been with the other lads all the time and they sometimes did things on their own but now we were all charged with everything. Finally the judge turned his attention to me. "Have you anything to say for yourself?" he asked severely. "No, sir", I answered.

He turned to the Superintendent. "It seems to me, Superintendent, they've been doing so much mischief in the streets of Limerick for the past few months that they don't know what they've done and what they haven't done".

"I took a bunch of bananas out of the car, sir", I said weakly.

"I agree with you, Your Honour", the Superintendent answered, ignoring me. "They seem to have lost track of what they did". He smiled as he spoke.

The worst part of it was the turmoil within, the conflict of inexplicable feelings. Was it possible for a twelve-year-old boy to stand there and not care what happened to him? Was it natural? The streets outside were so hateful to me I knew deep down I did not want to go back to them. But how could I **want** to be sent away? Oh God, help me to un-

derstand! These are not the thoughts and feelings of a young boy. I cannot **want** to go away and yet I do. Please, Justice, please don't send me away! If I could only **understand**. Why do I **want** to go? Oh God, tell me why I feel this way...

The young boy was standing in the middle of the playground at Sexton Street. It was the mid-morning break and he was surrounded by a hundred other boys laughing and pushing. The tears were streaming down his face hot and large and hurried as if they were impatient to escape till it seemed they must leave river beds behind them. The schoolmaster was also there and he had the boy's left arm gripped tightly with his right hand and his knuckles stood out big and white. He had a long thick round stick in his left hand and was tapping it against the side of his lame leg in time to the rhythm of his words.

"How-many-times-does-nine-go-into-eighty-one?" he shouted. He wasn't angry at all and smiled all the time.

"Eight t...t...times sir", the boy sobbed.

The teacher threw his head back and laughed. "Did ye hear that, lads?" he demanded, looking around at the sea of young faces. "We did, sir", some of them

answered. He turned back to the sobbing boy. "I'll teach you to do your homework, boy!" He shifted his weight away from his lame leg. "Hold out your hand!" The boy slowly stretched his hand out and closed his eyes tightly and for the tenth time the teacher, still smiling, brought the heavy stick down on the bruised palm.

Brother Andrews, the Head Brother, was standing over near the wall with three other brothers and two of the schoolmasters were also with them. And they were all laughing at the teacher and the boy. The boy's hand had turned blue and was all swollen up but the teacher kept hitting it with the stick till the boy's knees started bending with the weight and the pain and the shame...

Justice Gleeson's voice sounded far away, as if in a dream. "I don't see what else I can do, Superintendent. I'll have to send them to Daingean".

**DAINGEAN!** The word was like a sword thrust. **DAINGEAN!** The times we had talked about it and laughed about it and joked about it. And heard about it from boys who had been there.

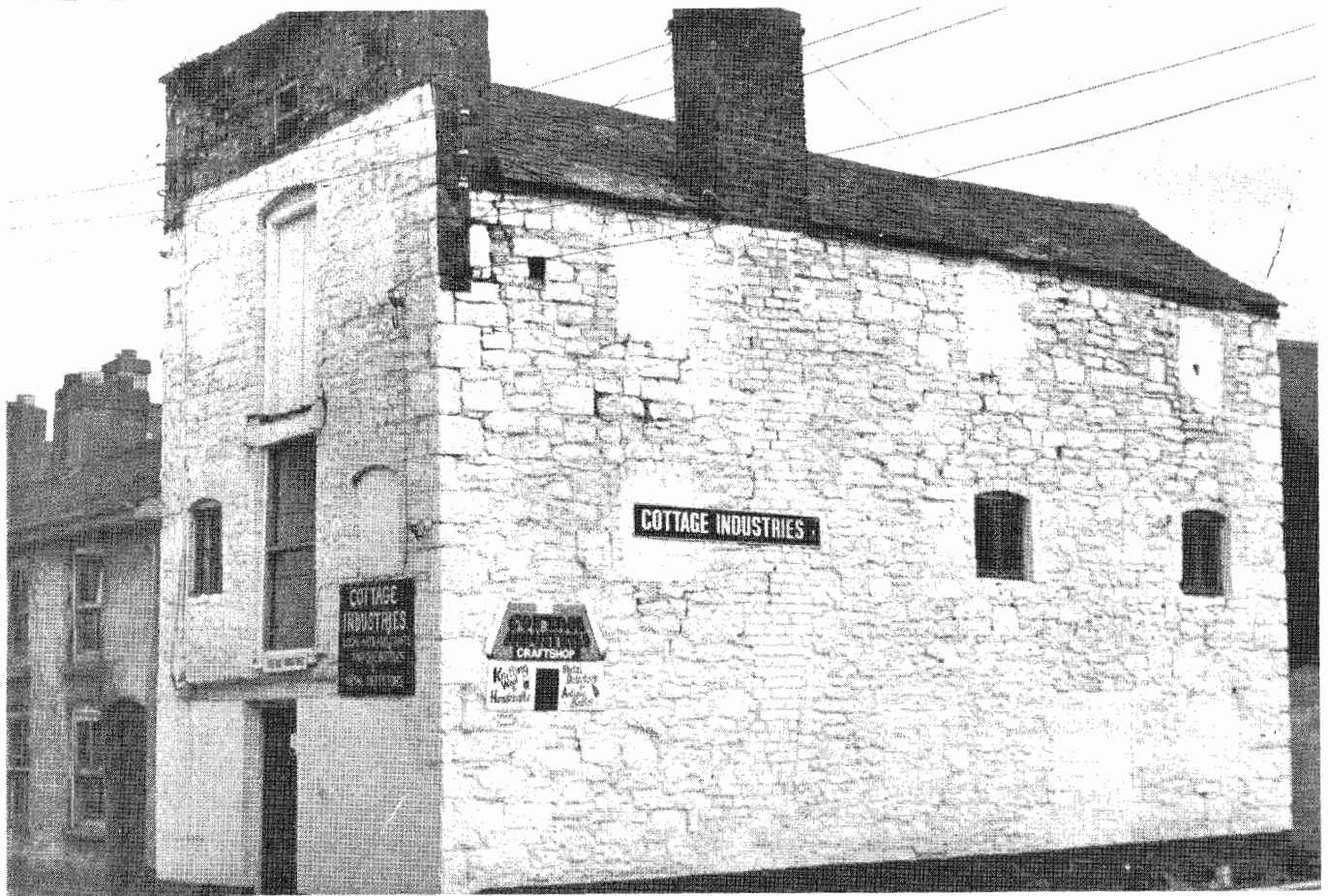
**DAINGEAN!** Would he really send us there?

Fully awake now, hanging on to his every word. He shuffled the papers decisively into a neat bundle in front of him. Not Daingean! Oh God, please God, not Daingean!

"I am committing all three of you to Daingean for a period of three years



The Courthouse.



A 1982 picture of Sean Bourke's home in Little Gerald Griffin Street.

each!"

I looked at the other two. They didn't seem to be distressed. Perhaps it wasn't just me. But surely they couldn't want to be sent away too? It wasn't right. It wasn't natural. Nobody could have thoughts like mine, feel the way I did. It was a curious elation that came over me and completely enveloped me as I walked from the court with the two policemen.

The other two boys would not be leaving for Daingean for another week so I would be making the journey on my own. Four hours in a cell in William Street Barracks to wait for the three o'clock train to Tullamore in Offaly. My mother called at dinner time with a can of tea and I drank it out of the lid as I ate the bread and jam sandwiches. She stood in the middle of the cold, damp cell watching me, and then she cried. "You'll have no mother by the time you get back! Oh God, you'll have no mother!" I didn't cry and I wondered if she was puzzled by my silence. I was glad to be leaving Limerick.

A young policeman in civilian clothes with a white belted raincoat collected me from the cell at half past two and told me that he would be escorting me to Daingean.

As we sat in the third-class carriage at Limerick Station I could see my mother making her way along the platform and looking in all the windows of the train to

see where I was. When she found me she reached in and handed me two bars of chocolate. The train started to move and she cried again and said something but I couldn't hear her words above the noise of the hissing steam and the chugging engine.

"Would you like a piece of chocolate?" I said to the policeman as we approached Limerick Junction. He smiled, "Thanks very much", he said, "I didn't have time to get anything myself".

That curious feeling of elation came over me again. I was glad to be leaving the claustrophobic poverty of Limerick and the mindless cruelty of Sexton Street. I would hate those Christian Brothers till my dying day.

We got off the train at Tullamore and walked to the police barracks, where my escort made enquiries about how to get to the village of Daingean where St. Conleth's Reformatory School was situated. The station sergeant got us a taxi and we went out on the last lap of our journey. Dusk was falling as we drove through the flat, dull boglands of Offaly. We passed through the village of Ballynagar and finally arrived at Daingean (known as Philipstown in the days of the British) at seven o'clock that night.

The car pulled up near the stone bridge over the Grand Canal and the driver spoke to a passing villager. "Could you tell us where the ... er ... Industrial

School is?" he asked, choosing his words out of politeness to me. The villager frowned. "You mean the reformatory?" he said. He pointed to a high stone wall on the other side of the bridge close by the canal. "That's it", he said. We crossed the bridge and drove through the iron gates.

The part of St. Conleth's school visible to the public gaze on the other side of the gates was a two-storey, symmetrical building consisting of three wings that embraced well-tended lawns. The main wing faced the gates and the other two wings were connected to it at right angles and faced each other across the expanse of lawns, so that the entire building resembled a giant letter E with the centre bar missing.

The driveway up to the main door was interrupted by a large marble plinth surmounted by a statue of St. Conleth. The car weaved round to the left of the statue in a semi-circular motion and then straightened out and went on for another twenty yards before coming to a halt.

I got out with the policeman and we stood for a moment on the gravelled driveway. I glanced back towards the gate but it was already hidden by the winter darkness and the bogland mist. Then the policeman nodded at the big solid door, "This is it", he said. "Let's go in".