

DAINGEAN DAYS

THE FIRST NIGHT

Daingean Reformatory for boys in Offaly was justly known as the Alcatraz of Ireland. More so than any adult prison could ever be, for there is a limit to the amount of abuse that can be meted out to grown men under the harshest of rules. But young boys of twelve and upwards have no way of hitting back at their tormentors, particularly when those tormentors are officially appointed and encouraged by the State.

I arrived at this inhuman institution on a cold dark Friday night in October 1947. I was just turned twelve years of age and had that morning been sentenced to three years by Justice Gleeson for the crime of stealing a bunch of bananas from the back seat of a motor-car.

The reception procedure was very informal. An elderly Brother with horn-rimmed glasses met us at the door. He invited my escorting policeman to go along to the parlour and told him that he would send along a meal and a pot of tea. The Brother then took me to a small office and made a note of my name and address. He allocated me the number 558 which for the next three years would be used mainly for stamping on my laundry. He then took me along to the kitchen where I was seated at a bare wooden table and given a mug of tea and a couple of slices of bread and butter and a plate of roast beef.

I should explain at this point that the kitchen in question was that which catered for the priests and brothers who ran Daingean Reformatory and not the kitchen which perpetrated the "meals" provided for the inmates. The boys' kitchen was referred to as the "cookhouse". This contrast was to be my first shock. And that plate of beef was to be the last meat I was to taste for a whole year.

Daingean Reformatory was (and still is today) run by a Roman Catholic order known as the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. They are priests and lay brothers and their distinctive insignia is a crucifix attached to a black cord round their neck and then stuck at an angle into the waist belt of the cassock. Their headquarters and training college is at Inchicore in Dublin and they also send missionaries overseas to convert the natives to their own Oblate beliefs.

The Brother in charge of the kitchen was Brother Fitzpatrick and he came from County Clare. As I ate my meal off

PART TWO

By Sean Bourke

the bare working table I noticed that there were four other boys with white aprons working at various chores. One was washing-up at the sink and then handing the plates and pots to another boy at a nearby table to dry them. A third boy was scrubbing bigger pots out in the adjoining scullery. The fourth and oldest boy seemed to be in charge. The first three boys seemed to be about fourteen years of age and the boy in charge was probably sixteen. All wore short trousers under their white aprons and black, down-at-heel battered boots with torn grey stockings just barely clear of the upper of the boots.

I was still wearing my dark blue Confirmation suit (also with short trousers) and, although a little the worse for wear, it made me look quite smart by comparison with the other boys who kept staring at me as they worked. At one stage, when Brother Fitzpatrick had left the kitchen for a moment to go to the refectory, the boy who was washing-up came across to me and whispered: "You'll be alright. You'll be working here in the kitchen with us and so you won't be on an outside job for the winter".

"How do you know that?" I asked surprised.

"Because you're good looking", he replied, and went back to his washing-up.

Dormitory time was at eight o'clock and as I had arrived at seven I did not have long to wait to get away to bed.



Sean Bourke's home

The other boys took off their aprons to get ready to go. "These lads will show you the way to the dormitory", Brother Fitzpatrick told me. Then, after a very brief pause, he added: "You can work here in the kitchen with us - you'd like that wouldn't you?"

"I don't mind, sir", I replied.

"Good", he smiled. "You can come in with the others tomorrow morning".

The dormitory was the ground floor of the wing to the right of the main building. It had bare floorboards and small single iron beds along each wall about three feet apart. The green paint was peeling off the walls and from the ceiling hung bare forty-watt bulbs suspended on long lengths of worn flex.

"There is no talking allowed once you step inside the dormitory", one of the kitchen boys whispered to me. And the silence was very noticeable indeed, as a cassocked Brother paced up and down the centre aisle glowering at the occupant of each bed. This brother was called Brother Stack and he was from Kerry. He pointed to a bed about half-way down on the left hand side and told me it was mine.

"Thank you, sir", I said.

"There is no talking allowed in the dormitory!" he growled. "You won't be told again!"

I went down to the bed allocated to me and took off my jacket and shirt. I began to fumble with the fly buttons of my trousers and noticed the other boys all staring at me and grinning. Then the boy in the next bed (who turned out to be from the "Bombing Field" in Limerick) whispered: "You have to take your trousers off in bed".

"In bed?" I stared at him incredulously.

"Yes. Between the sheets". He glanced furtively up the dormitory to the far end where Brother Stack was just about to turn around for his return journey. "If you take them off standing there, you'll be flogged for impurity".

I climbed in between the dirty sheets and with considerable difficulty removed my trousers and placed them on the floor with my jacket and shirt. There were no lockers.

There was no library at Daingean but the boys were allowed to read any comics they might have till ten o'clock. Then half the lights were switched off and everybody was required to go to sleep and a civilian night-watchman took over from Brother Stack and continued the pacing and the vigilance for the rest of the night.