

# DAINGEAN DAYS

WITNESS TO OBSCENITY

## PART THREE

By Sean Bourke

**S**f only the night-watchman hadn't been late coming on duty in the dormitory that night, it might never have happened. But he was late, a whole hour late. There had been some breakdown in communications and Brother Stack had left the dormitory at half past eight, expecting Mr. Donegan, a local villager, to arrive at any minute and take over his vigil for the night.

We had said our night prayers in the chapel at eight and had then been marched across the dark, wintry quadrangle towards the junior boys'

dripping, washed down by lukewarm, unsweetened tea contained in a rusty tin mug. The porridge and tea were poured out on all the tables about ten minutes before the boys were marched into the refectory and so were barely lukewarm when the boys finally sat down after a prolonged grace-before-meals. The grace itself might have to be repeated three or four times until the Brother on duty was satisfied that it

Commandments. A boy who did wrong did not commit a breach of discipline; he committed a **sin**. And sin had to be punished far more severely than purely temporal misdeeds. To remove a crust of bread from the swill-bin, as many of the starving boys were wont to do, was to break the Seventh Commandment. This merited a flogging. To say "Christ" or "Jesus", unless you happened to be on your bended knees in the chapel, was to break the Second Commandment. A boy who was rash enough not to comply instantly with an order given by a Brother broke the Fourth Commandment.

Rude and vulgar language, which by its very nature is bound to have some



Joe Merrick's Bar, the Pike, with the pump at its gable, where Sean Bourke played as a child.

dormitory where the junior boys, from twelve to fifteen, slept in two long rows of iron beds spaced evenly along the full length of the green-painted walls. The senior boys, from sixteen to twenty, had their dormitory at the opposite end of the school, and were watched over for the night by yet another civilian nightwatchman.

There was no supper at Daingean. The last meal of the day was tea at five o'clock, which consisted of a plate of porridge and two slices of bread and

had been said in perfect unison by the ravenously hungry mob.

Iron discipline was the rule at Daingean, and God help any boy who stepped out of line. The school was run by a religious order called the Oblates of Mary Immaculate whose headquarters in Ireland are at Inchicore, Dublin. The order is made up of both priests and lay brothers. It is not a teaching order and the brothers are "workers" without any formal qualifications. The only rules at Daingean were the Ten

sexual overtones, was only one step short of the ultimate sin in the eyes of the priests and brothers - undue familiarity with another boy. For both these sins the brothers invoked the Sixth Commandment. The penalty was a severe flogging followed by a diet of bread-and-water kneeling on the concrete floor of the refectory for a week.

I suppose it was a combination of hunger and the pent-up frustrations of the harsh discipline that made some of the junior boys go a bit wild that night

in the hour between Brother Stack's departure and the arrival of Mr. Donegan at nine-thirty. Not that anything very serious happened. There were a few innocent pillow fights, a certain amount of mock wrestling which, I remember, involved at least two Limerick boys whom I still meet in the street today, and a great deal of shouting. There was one boy, Mick Houlihan from Cahirciveen in the County Kerry, who did a little more swearing than the others. If a priest or brother walked in all the Ten Commandments would have been invoked and half the dormitory of a hundred boys would have been flogged.

But, tragically, one brother **did** see and hear. And that brother was the most savagely sadistic member of the Order in Daingean. Brother Fitzpatrick was from County Clare, and on that dark wintry night in October 1949 he was standing on an upturned box in the grass verge outside the dormitory wall peeping in through one of the uncurtained windows, invisible in his black habit to the unsuspecting boys inside and to the other brothers and priests who might be passing on the outside.

Equally tragic was the fact that Mick Houlihan worked in the priests' and brothers' kitchen with four other boys, including myself. And the man in charge of the kitchen was Brother Fitzpatrick.

The principle that an accused be punished only once for his crime did not apply in Daingean. Apart from the punishment meted out by the Prefect of Discipline, there were other beatings administered by the brother in charge of the boy's working party and by any other brother who just happened to be on duty in the exercise yard or the refectory when the accused came in sight. And Brother Fitzpatrick was in charge of Mick Houlihan's party in the kitchen.

Brother Fitzpatrick had a ritual which he had carefully developed and perfected over the years. A boy must not be punished too quickly; he must be made to suffer the mental torture of knowing that he is going to be beaten without knowing when or for what reason. And so, when the five of us arrived in the kitchen to start work at nine o'clock that morning exchanging a little cheerful banter, Brother Fitzpatrick carried out the first move of his sadistic ritual. "Keep quiet and get on with your work!" He looked Mick Houlihan straight in the face and scowled. "And that goes for you too, Houlihan. Get on with your washing-up!"

And so the ritual began. It was familiar to all of us. In exactly two hours, as the clock struck eleven, Mick Houlihan would be beaten. And between now and then none of us would utter one word to each other lest we be

made to join our wretched comrade on the sacrificial altar of Brother Fitzpatrick's sadistic lust.

The soup was made. The roast was in the oven for the priests and brothers. The breakfast pots and pans and cups and saucers were washed and shined. I myself as senior boy had laid out the cutlery and the various items of delph on the crisp white linen in the priests' and brothers' refectory. Brother Fitzpatrick sat on a chair next to the work-table against the kitchen wall opposite the long anthracite range reading his breviary, his pale lips moving silently in an ashen face. Mick Houlihan was over at the sink washing a plate for the tenth time, afraid to look up, visibly trembling. The silence was almost physical in its oppressiveness.

The kitchen clock struck eleven. Brother Fitzpatrick slowly closed his breviary, kissed it, and placed it on the shelf above the table. He got to his feet and walked to the small gap between the table and the dresser. He reached in and pulled out a stick about three feet long and an inch across. Nicholas O'Grady from Kilkenny picked up a sweeping brush and started towards the scullery in a desperate effort to escape what was to follow. "Put that brush down and stay where you are!" Brother Fitzpatrick growled. It was part of the ritual that when a boy was to be beaten the others must watch. The fear in their young faces was something Brother Fitzpatrick seemed to get great satisfaction from.

Mick Houlihan was still washing the same plate, afraid to stop, afraid to be idle and add to his guilt. "Put that plate down and turn round!" He did as he was told.

"You are the dirtiest little scut it has ever been my misfortune to meet. You are dirty and filthy and evil minded. Well, I'm going to teach you a lesson that you will never forget. Hold out your hand!"

Mick Houlihan held out his right hand. He thrust it forward fully and firmly, as if to show Brother Fitzpatrick that whatever he had done wrong he was sorry for it and was prepared to take his punishment like a man and maybe Brother Fitzpatrick in his mercy would take this into account. But this bold and frightened gesture was wasted and Mick Houlihan, at fourteen and a half years of age, was to receive the most vicious and sadistic beating I have ever seen inflicted on another human being.

Brother Fitzpatrick reduced Mick Houlihan's right hand to a black and blue pulp of bleeding flesh from the finger-tips to the elbow, and then ordered him to hold out his left hand. He did the same to this, bringing the stick back over his head and then down with all his physical might on the boy's trembling flesh. By this time, Mick

Houlihan was begging for mercy. "Please, sir, oh please sir, I won't do it any more sir, I won't, sir, I won't, sir ..."

"Shut up your whimpering, you cowardly little wretch!" Brother Fitzpatrick's face was by now a sickly white in colour and his lips trembled visibly. He looked almost epileptic. "You are filthy and disgusting. You have a foul mouth. You have a dirty mind. You are totally obscene. You are a dirty little coward who cannot take his punishment. And you are a robber and a Daingean boy. That is the testimonial you will take out into the world with you when you go. And I hope you are proud of it, you filthy wretch!"

"Oh, please, sir, please, sir, I won't do it anymore, sir. It was a slip of the tongue, sir ..." By this time Mick Houlihan's knees were giving way under the sheer agony of his ordeal, and his torrential tears were forming a small pool at his feet. "Please sir, please, sir ..." He looked like he was on the point of fainting. Surely Brother Fitzpatrick must stop now.

"Roll up your sleeves to your shoulders".

Mick Houlihan looked at him in horror. "Oh, please, sir, please".

Brother Fitzpatrick delivered three rapid blows to the boy's upper left arm, then three more to the right causing the shirt sleeves to sink into the sweat-soaked flesh with the force. "When I tell you to do something, you do it!"

"Yes, sir, yes, sir ..." Mick Houlihan's fingers were by now twice their normal size and he could not bend them at the joints. His hands and forearms looked like joints of raw meat that had been left hanging in a butcher's shop too long and had putrefied. He made a feeble gesture at forcing his sleeves up past the elbows but could not do so. His elbow joints, as well as his fingers, were beyond use. "I c-c-can't, sir, I c-c-can't ..." The sweat was pouring down his forehead in large beads. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm sorry, sir ..."

"You filthy dirty wretch!" Brother Fitzpatrick leaned the stick against the wall and grabbed hold of the boy. He forced both his sleeves up to the shoulders and picked up the stick once more. The contrast between the lower half of Mick Houlihan's arms and the upper was quite frightening and sickening. The broken black and blue flesh gave way at the elbows to the smooth, white skin of the upper arms and biceps so characteristic of the Daingean boy deprived of the sun. I felt myself trembling with fear and impatient rage and a deep loving compassion for my comrade in his terrible agony. The other three boys, from Longford, Wicklow and Cork, stood transfixed at their respective places of

labour, terrified to make a sound or a movement.

Realising that the boy was no longer physically capable of actively cooperating in the obscene ritual, Brother Fitzpatrick no longer told him to extend his hands. Instead he proceeded to lash him on the upper arms with all his force and continued for at least another five minutes until Mick's entire arms, from the fingers to the shoulders, were no longer recognisable as human limbs.

"Oh, God, oh, God! Please, Brother Fitzpatrick, please, sir, please ..."

Mick Houlihan fell to his knees at last, his young boy's strength and endurance finally spent. Sitting on his haunches, he eased his body forward and rested his forehead on the ground, his chin touching his knees. His arms hung loosely by his side, completely out of control, and the blood, trickling down his broken flesh, paused for a second at the finger-tips, and then fell to the floor to mingle with his sweat. He had finished pleading and he just moaned softly to himself.

"Dirty cowardly filthy wretch!" With all his might, Brother Fitzpatrick delivered three final blows to the boy's quivering back. The stick made a sickening thud as it fell and Mick Houlihan eased over on his side and lay still.

Brother Fitzpatrick looked across at me and then at the other three boys in turn. His face was contorted almost beyond recognition and he seemed to be shaking all over. When he spoke, his breath came in short gasps.

"Let that be a lesson to all of ye. There is enough filth and dirt in this world without ye people starting. Even to think an impure thought is a mortal sin. If ye haven't got the strength to avoid temptation and sin, then by God I'll give ye that strength - with this!" He held the stick tightly in his right hand until the knuckles were white and jabbed it rhythmically at each of us in turn. "With this", he repeated, "with this!"

He looked down at Mick Houlihan again with hatred in his eyes. "Get up, you devil incarnate, get up, before I give you the same again. Get up, you filthy, foul-mouthed wretch! And for the rest of the week you will wash up all the greasy plates in **cold** water! Do you hear me! - you filthy, cowardly little wretch!"

With what must have been a superhuman effort, Mick Houlihan slowly got to his feet. He turned back to his sink, and, by raising the right side of his body as high as he could, and then the left, he managed to get both his dead arms into the by now cold, greasy water. Lowering his head, he pulled at the plug stopper chain with his teeth and then somehow managed to turn on the cold tap in the same manner. He let the water flow over his

broken flesh as he sobbed quietly to himself.

Brother Fitzpatrick walked across the gap between the table and the dresser and replaced his blood-stained stick. Then he turned his attention to the four of us once more.

"Let that be a lesson to all of ye, do ye hear? If I hear any of ye using dirty language, that's what ye'll get. Foul, dirty, sinful language. Evil, that's what it is. Foul and evil. An insult to God. Just one word of foul language out of any of ye and ye won't be able to walk for a month!"

It was then I noticed that the crucifix, which was the badge of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, had worked its way loose from the belt of Brother Fitzpatrick's black habit during the ritualistic torture of Mick Houlihan and now hung loosely from the cord around his neck, swinging gently to and fro as he spoke. The crucifix had the figure of Christ in brass on a black wooden cross. Brother Fitzpatrick seemed to notice it at the same time and hastily tucked it back into his belt.

"Alright, get back to yeer work, all of ye", he said, dismissing us. "And I repeat for the last time, don't ever let me hear any of ye using a foul word, for if ye do, then may God help ye because I won't".

I made my way across the hall to the priests' and brothers' refectory. I took a bundle of rags from the press and went down on my knees to shine the linoleum floor. I couldn't get the thought of Mick Houlihan's mutilated young arms out of my mind and the terrible agony and despair of his tortured face. I didn't realise it then, but that day was to be the turning point of my life. It was the day I lost my innocence. Hardly a day was to go by from that day to this without my recalling the obscenity of Mick Houlihan's desperate sufferings and total degradation.

It was all done for the greater glory of God and with the acquiescence of the Civil Authority. And I have never respected either concept since. And never will as long as I live.



Sean Bourke died on 26th January 1982.