

# DAINGEAN DAYS

by Sean Bourke

## PART FOUR

**T**he day began at Daingean Reformatory with the shrill sound of the nightwatchman's hand-bell as he paraded up and down the centre of the dormitory shouting, "Come on, wakey wakey! Get out of those beds and get dressed before Brother Stack gets in!"

Brother Stack was the Kerryman in charge of the dormitories and the wash-house and his round face was perpetually flushed with anger. He would arrive to take over from the civilian nightwatchman at 7.30 a.m. By then we would all have our beds made and would be lined up ready for the next phase of the never-changing daily ritual.

It was the middle of October 1947 when I arrived in Daingean and I was twelve-and-a-half years of age. The winter of that year was a particularly bitter one and the snow was heavy and stayed thick on the ground. We left the dormitory in two parallel lines and were marched by Brother Stack through the dark, snow-covered grounds of the Reformatory. On the other side of the chapel was a long shed with small windows from which came a very faint light to punctuate the gloom. This shed had a single door at each end and as we, the junior boys, entered at one end, the senior boys (those from sixteen to twenty) were coming in at the other end. This shed was called the wash-house.

Both the senior and the junior boys were divided into sections called after different saints, and these sections were in turn arranged so as to keep the boys together as much as possible within their own age groups. Whenever the senior boys and the junior boys had to be brought together, the youngest section of the senior boys was deliberately positioned closest to the oldest section of the junior boys, and this progression went on so that the oldest boys in the senior sections were at all times farthest from the youngest boys in the junior sections. The significance of all these elaborate arrangements did not dawn on me for many months. The 24 brothers and five priests at Daingean Reformatory seemed to have an obsession with the Sixth Commandment.

The wash-house had a bare concrete floor and unpainted walls from which the plaster was crumbling. Like the dormitory, it had a number of bare, 40-watt bulbs suspended on lengths of worn flex from the beams of the tin roof. The only furniture was a long wooden stand stretching from one end

of the shed to the other down the middle of the floor. On this stand were positioned two parallel lines of tin basins already filled with water. There was only one tap in the wash-house to which was attached a long rubber hose for filling the basins.



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The boys lined up on either side of the stand, facing each other, the junior boys at one end of the wash-house and

the senior boys at the other, with the youngest of the senior boys closest to the oldest of the junior boys. Near each basin was a small piece of yellow soap the kind used for scrubbing floors. There was no heating in the wash-house and the ice was about a quarter of an inch thick in the basins. I copied the other boys and broke the ice with a quick jab of the elbow before having a wash in the freezing water.

Absolute silence had to be maintained at all times. The first words of the day could only be spoken at breakfast. Brother Stack had departed and Brother Ahearn was supervising the wash-house. He did this by standing on a wooden box at the point where the senior boys met the junior boys and watching every move and listening for the slightest whisper. Brother Ahearn was nicknamed, "The Killer". I found out why on that very first morning in Daingean.

Some boy was heard to whisper to another at the other end of the wash-house. Brother Ahearn went red in the face. "If I catch the fella that's talked he won't be able to talk again for a long time!" he shouted. He had a harsh, grating voice. Then suddenly he seemed to notice something. He jumped down off the box and ran down to where the whisper had come from. He caught hold of the a boy of about seventeen and proceeded to beat him methodically with his fists. He punched the boy in the face repeatedly until his lip was split and his nose spurted blood. In his frenzy, Brother Ahearn's crucifix worked its way loose from the belt of his cassock and, dangling from its neck cord, jumped about in a grotesque dance as he carried out his attack on the terrified boy.

Brother Ahearn then resumed his position on the wooden box and glared up and down the wash-house. "Ye scum of the earth!" he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. "Ye dirty, filthy, good-for-nothing scum of the earth! Ye dirty pack of robbers! Ye will be no loss to anyone when ye go back to the dirty filthy hovels and the ignorant, illiterate fathers and mothers that ye came from!"

From the wash-house we were marched once more through the snow and darkness to the chapel for Mass. The bright lights and the heating were a welcome relief from the squalor we had just left. The youngest of the junior boys were up in the front pews and the older ones about half way down the chapel. One row of pews was then left empty to separate the youngest of the senior boys from the oldest of the

junior boys. Further down towards the back of the chapel there was a wide gap separating the boys completely from the special pews for the priests and brothers. The Mass of course was in Latin and went on for about half an hour, being celebrated this morning by a Cork priest named Father Curtin.

After Mass we were marched across the grounds of the Reformatory again to an enclosed, gravelled yard where Brother Ahearn put us through half an hour of P.T. in the snow. Then, at long last, it was time for breakfast. Another march through the gloom to the boys' dining hall. And here another shock awaited me.

The dining hall was part of the main building and comprised the entire ground floor of one of the wings. The floor was scrubbed concrete and the walls were painted dark green. From the peeling white-washed ceiling hung the inevitable 40-watt bulbs. Along each of the two longer walls was a row of tables covered with black and white chequered linoleum like large chess boards. There were eight wooden kitchen chairs with spoked backs at each table. In front of each chair was a rusty tin mug filled with sugarless tea that had been poured out from buckets half an hour before and was now almost cold. Next to the mug was a chipped enamel plate half filled with watery porridge that had also been poured out half an hour before and was also now cold. (The boys working in the dining hall were excused P.T. so that they could do the pouring out well in

advance of breakfast time). There was a small cob of bread for every two boys amounting to about two slices each.

The centre aisle of the dining hall was marked off from the table areas by two white lines that stretched the whole length of the hall. The boys, on entering the dining hall, had to stand with their toes just touching these white lines and facing each other in two long single files across the aisle, their backs to the tables. Brother Stack was back in charge again. He waited until you could hear a pin drop and, since everyone was starving, he did not have long to wait. Then, very slowly and deliberately, he started to make the sign of the cross and we all followed suit. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen".

He waited again to see if he could detect a whisper. But the dining hall was as silent as a morgue. Then he went on, the boys carefully following and repeating his every word. "Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which, of Thy bounty, we are about to receive, through Christ our Lord. Amen. And may the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen."

But some of the boys, in their impatient hunger, had rushed the grace before meals and Brother Stack had noticed it. He made us say the prayer four more times before he was satisfied and by then we had already been ten minutes in the dining hall and the breakfast was stone cold. Finally, he clapped his hands together loudly as a

signal for us to sit down.

The porridge was uneatable and the tiny pat of margarine was hardly sufficient for one of the two slices of bread. Everybody forced himself to drink the cold tea. There was nothing else.

Twenty minutes later Brother Stack stopped his pacing up and down the centre aisle and, placing himself at the point where the oldest of the junior boys met the youngest of the senior boys, he slapped his hands together again about three or four times. Everybody went silent. He clapped his hands again, once, and we all resumed our positions with our toes to the white lines facing each other across the aisle. Again, slowly, and deliberately: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen". Another pause whilst he listened for someone talking. "We give Thee thanks to Almighty God for all Thy benefits, who livest and reignest world without end. Amen. And may the souls of the faithful departed through the grace of God rest in peace. Amen."

The grace after meals had to be said three times before Brother Stack was satisfied that we really were grateful to God for his bounty. Then we were marched off to our various jobs.

I couldn't help reflecting as we left the dining hall that the Oblates of Mary Immaculate seemed to be more concerned with the dead and their sins than with the living and their sufferings. It was going to be a long three years.

Uimh. No. A 1255  
18



Deimhniú báis ar na h-éisiúint de bhun na hAchta um Chlárlú Breitheanna agus Básanna 1863 go 1972.  
DEATH CERTIFICATE issued in pursuance of Births and Deaths Registration Acts 1863 to 1972.

Básanna a Clárlaíodh i gCeantar Deaths Registered in the District of <u>Kilree</u>		i gCeantar an Chláraitheora Maoirseachta do in the Superintendent Registrar's District of <u>Kilree</u>				i gContae <u>Clare</u> Éire in the County of <u>Clare</u> Ireland				
Uimh. No.	Dáta agus Ionad Báis Date and Place of Death	Ainm agus Sliocht Name and Surname	Gnéas Sex	Staid Condition	Aois an lá breithe is déanaí Age last Birthday	Céim, Gairm nó Sli Bheatha Rank, Profession or Occupation	Cúis Báis Dheimhniúithe agus fad an tinnis Certified Cause of Death and Duration of Illness	Síniú, Cáilocht agus Ionad Cónaithe an Fhaisnéisora Signature, Qualification and Residence of Informant	An dáta a Clárlaíodh When Registered	Síniú an Cláraitheora Signature of Registrar
1	<u>1982</u> <u>January</u> <u>55</u> <u>Trinity street</u> <u>Kilree</u> <u>Co. Clare</u>	<u>Sean</u> <u>Bourke</u>	<u>male</u>	<u>married</u> <u>deceased</u>	<u>49</u> <u>years</u>	<u>none</u>	<u>Heart Pulmonary</u> <u>Oedema</u> <u>left ventricular</u> <u>failure</u> <u>coronary</u> <u>thrombosis</u> <u>both</u>	<u>certified</u> <u>from T. A. Saly,</u> <u>Coroner for Clare,</u> <u>De just held on</u> <u>6th April, 1982</u>	<u>April</u> <u>1982</u>	<u>Justly so</u>

Deimhnímse leis seo gur Fíor Chóip í seo de Thaifead Uimh. 55 i gClár-leabhar Básanna atá faoi mo chúram. I hereby Certify that the foregoing is a true Copy of the Entry No. 55 in a Register Book of Deaths in my custody.

Is é Bliain an Bháis sa Chóip dheimhniúithe thuas ná  
The Year of Death shown in the above Certified Copy is  
Míle nine gCéad and eighty-two  
One Thousand nine Hundred and eighty-two

Cláraitheoir (\*Maoirseachta) na mBreitheanna agus na mBásanna  
(Superintendent) Registrar of Births and Deaths  
i gCeantar Kilree  
for the District of Kilree  
Oifig Kilree, Co. Clare  
Office Kilree, Co. Clare  
Dáta 30th September, 1982  
Date 30th September, 1982

\*Series amach an focal (idir iáibín) mura n-éireann sé  
†Strike out word in brackets if not applicable.

Sean Bourke's death certificate