
The death of Feathery Bourke

So, "Feathery" Bourke is dead. He died peacefully in his bed just over a week ago and was buried in his mother's plot at Mount St. Lawrence's Cemetery on a dull and dreary Monday afternoon after three o'clock Mass at St. Michael's Church.

Michael Bourke was born nearly eighty years ago, one of a family of four brothers and one sister. In due course the others all fled the nest in the natural way of things, but Feathery stayed behind with his mother and became the natural choice to inherit her extensive property, her money, and the scrap business which was to become the centre of his life for more than sixty years, and which gave him the nickname that he was to take to the grave with him.

He was a wealthy man, having made his pile, like so many other scrap dealers, in time of war. At one time he would have bought anything that was re-saleable at even a penny profit, from a rabbit skin to an old steam engine; from a jam jar to a bundle of rags—having first thoroughly searched the rags to ensure that they were not weighted-down with rocks. Many a wartime schoolboy trotted along to the Tivoli Cinema to pay homage to Hopalong Cassidy and Buck Jones on the proceeds of these transactions. And as for the source of the various items of "scrap": most of the boys (including this writer) were not unduly concerned with the ethics of acquisition.

But for the last ten years of his life Feathery Bourke became less and less preoccupied with the business of scrap and concentrated more and more on the proceeds of his various properties in Limerick and Dublin. He still walked six days a week from his lodge near the Bishop's estate in the North Circular Road (he actually sold the estate to the Bishop) to his delapidated little shop opposite the city market-place. Here he would sit for eight hours a day forlornly watching a rapidly-changing world go by, an affluent world of plastic and pre-cast concrete in which there was little demand for scrap of any kind, and in moments of boredom he would pore over a small mountain of tenancy agreements and deeds of title with a magnifying glass clutched in the three remaining fingers

by Sean Bourke

of his right hand.

In these last years Feathery's shop had become little more than a place of pilgrimage for his numerous nephews and their wives and children, as they paused briefly in Limerick on their way to and from distant lands, to gaze in wonder at this last tenuous link with their forefathers and the past.

This writer, who was also a nephew, was passing Feathery's shop shortly before he died. "Excuse me, young man," said Feathery, "but do you know anything about electricity?" "I do indeed," I assured him. He then told me that he was having trouble with his lights. After a brief examination it was clear to me that the whole place was in imminent danger of going up in flames. There were bare wires all over the place and the domestic fuse had a piece of "fuse" wire in it that was as thick as a broom handle, with the result that the main fuse had long since burned out. I went shopping and came back with some new flex and fuses and switches. After a couple of hours I had rendered the place safe.

"You should have no more trouble now," I said finally, and started to leave. "Wait, I must pay you," Feathery said. "You will not," I told him. (In fact, the materials had cost me only about two pounds.) But Feathery insisted. He put his three-fingered hand into the pocket of his ancient greasy raincoat, bent over double, and searched around in the lining, down in the region of the hem near his ankles. Slowly he straightened up and withdrew a dirty canvas bag with a pull-through cord at the neck. He opened the bag, inserted his three-fingered hand, felt around inside, withdrew his hand, and then, with the air of a man embarrassed by his own generosity, he pressed his hand into mine and disappeared quickly into his inner office. I looked down at my palm. It contained **ONE SHILLING!**

I wonder do they make uncles like that anymore?



Feathery Bourke's store in High Street. From a drawing by Ger Lennon.