

Early days on the Island

Field

by Joe Malone

I grew up in the Island Field on which the Limerick Corporation built one of its first big housing estates in the city. The Island Field, a low-lying, oblong piece of land at the northern end of King's Island, was so called because it was almost entirely surrounded by water. My parents were among the first families to move in, and by then the new houses had been named St. Mary's Park. But we never called the old place anything other than the Island Field and saw no reason to change, even when the name took on certain connotations in some people's minds. After all, King Island is the most ancient part of the city and the name, Island Field, has a long and honourable lineage.

As children we used to hang around the shops at night, planning and scheming our next day's galavanting, after we had cinder-picked and rooted the dump at Corkanree. We always planked a few jam-jars and bucket handles, which were valuable pieces of merchandise. Our nightly hiding den was the old military graveyard, which was cared for by an old man and woman. He was a small blocky man and wore a different cap every day of the week, except on Sunday when he wore a hat. His wife was a jolly little woman, and wore a bun in her hair, and had a clean well-ironed apron over her speckled bib. They had two children, who were tall and pale faced and always appeared clean. They were half-Protestant, that was the difference, as my mother would say. We had an enduring respect for the shy, quaint little family. They had a small number in their family because they were different.

We said our 'good nights' as the churchyard gates were being slammed and the bolts put on. Off to bed with shouts of 'quench the candle' to whoever was last into our communal palliasse. Five or ten minutes in bed and the hopper fleas would begin their parasitic prodding.

We would sometimes hear the hobnail boots of the military Red Caps' pounding on the roof-tops cursing and swearing at the army deserter who hid in a different house every night. The deserter had escaped from the 'Digger' in Collins' Barracks, Cork and still had his Martin Henry suit, with a No 1 haircut to match. The women impeded the Red Caps', as the fugitive soldier made his way through the maize of streets shouting abuse at his enraged would-be captors. Most of them were bogmen and didn't know the layout of the streets.

We gathered in the big stone tenement house at the top of the Protestant hill, as we called it. We sat down under the wide stairs and each in turn placed his wares in the centre of the floor. Bucket handles, jam-jars galore, all to be sold to Feathery Bourke - depending on what kind of a mood he was likely to be in. Some people used to say about him, 'If his nose was running, he was as mean as dykewater, and if it was dry, a decenter man you could not find in a day's walk'. Well, wet snot or no snot, we needed the money.

We sat down and played pontoon for buttons until the street became quiet. We could hear the old soldier upstairs singing 'The Coast of Malabar' and cursing John Bull for the loss of his left eye in the Dardanelles. Once a year he would go over to London to get fitted with a new glass eye, to secure an increase in pension and - he would tell us - to shake hands with the King. On his return journey to Ireland, just about half-way across the Irish Sea, he would stand on deck, pluck out his eye, look back at the coast of England and cast it into the Irish Sea and shout, "Damn the King and all belongin' to him". He was clever enough, though, to keep a spare glass eye on his man-



Joe Malone aged four.

tlepiece in case the Jubilee nurse or the British Legion doctor called.

To get a 'rise' out of the soldier we would sing 'Vote, Vote, Vote for de Valera'. Shouts would come from the top landing: 'Up the Blueshirts!' 'God Bless the Prince of Wales!' Fanny the Fenian would answer in a knacker's voice. 'What about Mrs. Simpson? She's a right 'fol-de-dal'.' Back in Limerick with a jingle in his pocket, the soldier would stagger home footless and eyeless every night for a month.

One night in the Cooperage the Cadger was caught plaffing the cards and got a clout in the puss! That ended the pontoon school. "Give us a tune Wedger", said the Gosser. The Gosser sat monkey style; he was double jointed and could climb a drain pipe like a weasel and could pick his nose, scratch himself and play the jew's harp at the same time.

The Wedger pulled out a mouth-organ from his waistcoat pocket and gave a few rasps. Wedger was, as some people said, a fairy's child. Old Fanny told us the whole story one night. The Wedger slept by night with a man called Tom the Goat, who made a living cinder-picking from the clinker dumped from the Gas House. Fanny, who had a loose tongue and was a bit of a bulum, told us that Wedger was the son of a doctor who lived up near the Lyric cinema and his mother had been a servant-girl in the doctor's house. She died of consumption after spending the last few years of her life living in a damp cellar in Mallow Street. The Goat used to wash himself



Mayor James Casey turns the sod to start the housebuilding on the Island Field

once a week in the canal in preparation for his trip up town to collect the money for Wedger's upkeep, who saw very little of it anyway.

The Gosser asked Wedger for a drass of the mouth organ but was refused. The Gosser called Wedger a bastoon and at that a scream came from the top landing. It was Gosser's sister, dressed in pink knickers and long black stockings. She looked like the Maid of Erin in distress. "Get to school out of it or ye'll finish up like your brothers scratching yourself at street corners and slagging the likes of me and May Crump when we are up town with our fellas".

"Fellas!" said Wedger, "The Irish Army aren't good enough for ye? Trapesing around the city looking for toffs from the Ennis Road. Have ye moved from Pinky Downey's?" She ranted and raved, and sent a rubbish bucket flying off the banister, scattering ashes, eggshells and water all over the hall.

The Cadger was the last to arrive at our meeting. He used to go every morning to Sister Carmel's Clinic and have his cacky eyes washed out and get the free bun and milk. He stuck his hair-oiled head in the door, a mixture of bayrum and trotter oil streaming down his neck, hair parted in the middle like Dixie Dean. The Cadger loved Irish rebel songs, he began to sing 'The Bold Fenian Men'. The Gosser roared: "Will you stop those eegity Irish songs, you bloody bolavaun!" The Cadger snapped back: "I'll follow in me father's footsteps anyway, not like you and your father wearing poppies just to get free blankets from Lady Nash and the British Legient!"

"Your father's footsteps! That wouldn't be hard for you. Your father's only claim was that he played the flute in the Sinn Fein band, and on the way out to Killonan he fell out and ran all the way back home to Limerick."

We left the stone house, or the Bishop's Palace, as it was known to most people who lived in it, and went our different ways through the numerous back lanes in the King's Island, and met again under the swivel bridge. The bridge was a famous meeting place, just like Paddy's Hedge was for the old I.R.A.

Wedger was first to arrive and said that the Gosser was seen running down O'Connell Street and firing a tailor's dummy right between two fat pig buyers who spent twenty years planning a never-to-be taken holiday by gapping through the window of the British Rail office in O'Connell Street. Gosser arrived panting for breath, sat down and laughed helplessly for nearly ten minutes before finally telling us that Cadger had pinched Miss Ima Weight, the thirty-stone fat woman who had been on display in a window at Roche's Street. It was three pence to look at her and six pence to feel; the Cadger made a glutton of himself. He arrived under the bridge with a pair of rabbits under his arm, compliment of Miss Lena Barratt. "Chicken-choker supreme", he shouted, "some fine day I'll choke that Casey's parrot. That bird is almost human; he kept on shouting after me 'chicken plucker, chicken plucker'. I was full sure he was saying

something else."

We could hear the heavy traffic above us. Army lorries and the motorbike squadron, led by the famous Stanley Wood, were on their way to the tatoo being held in Thomond Park. It was a show of strength and might, with the Construction Corp, the A.R.P. and the L.D.F., the Sons of Ireland, on the march. We were sitting on the remains of the Fitzgibbon memorial, cheering and waving as the No 1 Army Band struck up 'God Save Ireland', when around the corner came our neighbour the ex-British soldier, waving a Union Jack, a defiant look in his good eye, the glass eye held aloft, and he singing 'God Save the King'. He wheeled his hand violently and threw his glass eye at the two red setters on the parapet, above the front doorway of the Craven A fag factory, shouting wild abuse at his wife who worked there: "Craven A today, Craven butts tomorrow". He was arrested by two 'Red Caps' and dragged along the street still shouting abuse.

Bogmen in all directions, we continued our journey to the pageant over Sarsfield Bridge, taunting street musicians on the way. We spent most of our day ducking the school guard. Nevertheless we had a good day's sport. We gave a hand to some of the hawkers to dismantle their stalls and for our services we got lemonade and biscuits. With our bellies full and light hearts, we made for home.

It was near to midnight and we could hear the raspy voice of Sully the news vendor, who gave away as many papers as he sold. A drunken man came up the High Road with a ballcock swinging on his shoulder like a vagabond. Sure enough 'twas the Midnight Plumber. Some poor woman paid him in advance to have her lavatory cleaned and, as usual, he drank it. He was notorious for turning up at midnight, or when the pub closed. We parted company and each of us went home happy and contented.

As I entered my halldoor I could see the lonely drooped figure of Wedger going to his Cooperage house. No wonder he was sad more often than happy. Four years in a reform school for a dozen apples swiped from people who had no right to the land they squatted on, and the fancy name they gave their house... called after some famous Irish clan. He related to me that he used to be given some hot water to clean the Head Brother's shaving gear. He used this water to boil raw perriwinkles in, the hunger was so great.

He looked back at me and said, "Don't forget tomorrow, it's Doctor Feely's day for visiting the sick. Which meant, of course, that we had a good chance of getting a few wing. Every house the doctor went into he threw money up for a sulk, it was the only way he had of keeping us away from the front of his car. The small doctor with the bushy eyebrows was loved by all of us in our own way. He was a man who saw very few full nights' sleep and made comparatively little money for all his life time's work among the poor of Limerick.