

THE problem with any personal memoir written these days in Limerick is that Frank McCourt got there first.

Two Limerick authors, one of long standing and one new to the genre, have had opposite experiences of the McCourt Factor.

In the case of Criostoir O'Flynn's 1998 memory of a Limerick boyhood, *There Is An Isle*, the timing couldn't be better and, having been rejected by five publishers, it was eventually published and sold well "largely because it was seen as a riposte to *Angela's Ashes*, a book set in the same period, as he puts it himself".

Unlike McCourt's tale of undiluted misery and gloom, O'Flynn managed to convey a happy childhood, a structured education and a life devoted to all things literary from an early age. And the timing was good too. McCourt published in New York in 1996 and the controversy only really got going here in Limerick in 1997-78.

The McCourt Factor is having a negative effect on another city man, Austin O'Donovan of Emmett Place, off St Joseph Street. He has written 34,000 words on his life and experiences, but the publishers whom he approached seem to feel that the market would be too limited.

He tried electronic publishing on the Internet, but was thwarted by the excessive time it took to download the illustrations.

And the cost of private publishing was, he discovered, "astronomical".

The book, *O'Donovan from Garryowen*, arises from the fact that Austin O'Donovan has been a prolific contributor to the correspondence columns of newspapers, notably the *Limerick Leader*.

He was repeatedly asked whether, given his wide knowledge of Limerick and its people, he might not compile it all together into one volume. This he now has done.

As a flavour of what he has in mind, here is one short chapter, entitled 'My first day at school':

**T**HE first school I went to was St. John's Convent School at the back of St. John's Cathedral. This school catered for boys and girls. The boys stayed until they had their First Communion made. Then they had to leave and go to a primary school for boys. In my case, that was St. John the Baptist School, which was at the back of our garden in Sarafield Avenue. All I had to do was climb over the gar-

den wall and I was in the school.

My first day going to the convent school was a big day for me. I remember they turned me out very well, everything I wore was span new. My Auntie Theresa and my mother brought me up to school. My mother wasn't very well at the time. The memories I had of my mother at that time, was that she was always sick. That was something I just didn't understand.

That is why Theresa was with my mother when they brought me up to school on my first day.

The entrance to the school was straight in front of O'Halloran's Lane in Cathedral Villas. There was a dark green wooden door leading into the school. That door would be opened in the morning and there was a nun who stood outside that door ringing a bell. It was probably the first time I ever saw a nun in my life. She was dressed in black and had a white veil covering her head. You couldn't even see one rib of her hair or her ears.

From what I remember of her she was just encased in this white starched veil that covered her wrist to the tips of her fingers that was all you could see of her hands. Everything else was covered up, the long black dress she was wearing, was almost touching the ground, all you could see were the tips of her shoes. The nun had a black leather belt around her waist with a long black leather strap hanging from it. She had a rosary bead tied around her waist with a wooden crucifix.

There were the biggest rosary beads I ever saw, the beads were the size of big marbles or dobbers or taws. Dobbers and taws we used to play with in the channels beside

the footpaths, when we used to play the road games. The crucifix was almost touching the ground I used to pity them wearing that outfit in the very hot days of summer. She was a fascinating sight to see and every now and again she would lift up her arm, and ring the school bell, you could hear that bell ringing all over Garryowen.

We would line up outside the wall until she was ready to lead us into school. She didn't like leaving any adults into the school; she would take the children from them at the gate, but as it was my first day at school, my mother was allowed to take me in, we walked across the girl's playground to the boy's school. There was another nun standing at that gate, leading to the boy's school. There were large iron gates and an iron fence, separating the infant boy's from the girl's playground, and the gates were always locked with a padlock and chain.

The teachers' names were Miss Whelan, Miss O'Driscoll and Miss Cronin. The classes were infants, middle infants and seniors. Miss Whelan is the teacher I remember most of all. The nun that had the First Communion class was Sister Paul. The nuns took charge of the bigger kids; the lay teachers looked after the babies and middles class.

My first memories of the classroom, was of a big open fireplace facing us in the room, and on the left hand side of this was a huge blackboard that everyone in the room could see clearly. There were four lines of school desks across the room, and about five desks in each line. There were two children at each desk. In the winter time when the fire was lighting, I can remember when the milkman came, seeing the whole front of the fireplace filled with bottles of milk to keep it warm.

I remember seeing one or two bottles bursting from the heat of the fire. The corks on the milk bottles were round and made of cardboard. I remember licking the cream off of those corks, I used to save those corks and swap them for comics. The girls used them as mock money

and the three classes were put together if the school priest or inspector wanted to talk to all the classes together. The classroom that I went into had a big black and white wooden rocking horse in it. The teacher would often pacify a child if he wanted to go home or missed his mother. They would put a child on the rocking horse; this rocking horse had a long white tail that you could pull out. Sometimes that would be enough to stop a child from crying.

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when they played shop. There was a place in those corks where you stuck your finger in, you could pull out the cork quite easily. You could see the cream building up on the top of those bottles of milk.

There were drawings of dogs and cats and birds and all other animals, pinned up all around the walls of the classroom. They were lovely coloured drawings. At different times of the year, young student teachers would come to visit the class and would have more drawings to put up around the classroom. The presses in our classroom stored small black slates that you could chalk on. Those slates were about twelve inches square. Every child got one of those miniature black boards, and a piece of chalk.

You had to copy what the teacher wrote on the big blackboard. Sometimes you got a small tin box, there was hinges on this box, and when you opened it up, it was full of yellow maize corn seeds. The teacher would ask you to make shapes with this corn.

She might write the number 1 on the blackboard, you had to put the seed one after another to form that shape. She might ask you to make a circle and so on. On very cold mornings she might gather the whole class up around the fire huddled together to keep warm and read a story to us. I used to love those times.

I don't remember getting pencils or paper in the first two classes in that school. Those were very happy days in my life, being left out to play in the playground was great fun also.

There was a shed in the playground with iron poles, we used to run around those poles and

swing off them. There were outside toilets for the children, with about six flush toilets, in one corner of the playground. I used to love to flush the toilets, there were long chains hanging down for us to reach them. It was fascinating to watch the water flowing into the toilet bowl, whether you went to the toilet or not.

The bell for lunch would ring and the nun would be at the gate ready to let you out, but someone would have to meet you at the gate before she would let you out. She didn't like leaving out the small children. She used to encourage the mothers to leave the kids in school at lunchtime, to play with the other children and get used to the playground. She would prefer the mothers to bring something up to the gate for them to eat. I was allowed to go home for the first week only, after that I had to stay in school, and wait for someone to feed me at lunchtime.

The mothers would be waiting outside the bars of the gate, with mugs of hot cocoa and bread and jam. I don't remember my mother coming up to the school gate that often, as she was nearly always sick in bed. My Uncle Willie, Auntie Theresa or Auntie Lilly in McDonnell's Cottages would come with something for me to eat. I loved Uncle Willie coming up, as he would always bring something from the shop. I would ask him, "what have you got for me?" and he would say "drink in all the cocoa and eat the bread and we shall see".

Auntie Lilly always brought a cup of hot milk, with bread and onions in it; you would have to eat that with a

satisfied with you, she would give you "absolution" for your sins, and for your penance, you might get three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, the last thing you done was say an act of contrition and that was it. That was practised several times until she was sure every boy knew what to do. My biggest problem was trying to think of sins to tell her.

One of the worst experiences of my life and something that I will never forget happened to me in St John's Cathedral as a little boy. It hurts me even now to describe it. This happened about twelve months before I made my First Communion. A parcel came from America or England and there was a load of clothes in this particular parcel. There was a suit in it for a little boy of my age, it was a beautiful beige-coloured suit and it fitted me perfectly.

First Communions were always made on a Saturday, but I would safely say that my experience took place on a Sunday morning. I was dressed in this suit and my Auntie Theresa took me up to Mass that Sunday morning.

Standing in the hallway of St John's Cathedral was Father Creed, the priest. The two doors in the centre aisle were wide open. He took me away from my Auntie Theresa, and told me to follow the boys up into the seats at the top of the church, which I did.

He probably thought I was one of the boys that made my First Communion, all the girls were in the top seats, and a lady was telling them where to go. I presume she was a teacher from their school. The boys were put into the seats behind the girls and I was in the

last seat behind with boys. When it was time to move the teacher led the first seat off first, they walked to the side and received the Blessed Eucharist. Then I turned left, walked down the side aisle and back up the middle of the church to their seats. I didn't have a clue what was happening, and when they came to me I hesitated. The teacher shouted to me "come on, come on".

Of course I got up and followed the boy in front of me and received the Blessed Sacrament. I followed the boys down to the end of the church, they turned up the middle to go back to their seats. I was completely bewildered at this stage, I just didn't know what to do, so I walked out the front door of the church. I remember when I got outside the front door of St John's Cathedral; I spit out the Eucharist onto the ground. I was very confused and didn't know what to do.

I remember I looked in and saw two men standing in the hall of the church, collecting money. There was a small table in front of them, with a tray with a load of old pennies and ha'pennies on it. I remember the two of them looking at one another and bursting out laughing at me. I don't ever remember my Auntie Theresa collecting me after Mass and take me down home. But if my memory serves me right, I ran away from that place as fast as I could home, and upstairs to my mother. I jumped on the bed and put my arms around her and burst out crying.

She was confused, and didn't know what was after happening to me, until Auntie Theresa came back and for a long time they were ridiculing me over that, saying I should have known better. The one thing I remember my mother saying to me on that particular day was "Austin when you make your

First Communion, I will buy you a new black suit, the suit will have a black velvet collar. You will have a white shirt, with a Limerick lace collar, and a blue tie. You will have a miraculous medal with a ribbon and a white carnation flower, and black shoes and white stockings. You will be the best dressed little boy in your class and you will have your photo taken. You will be a very pretty boy when you make your First Communion".

Little did she know that the Blessed Eucharist I received on that day was the only one I was ever going to receive in her lifetime. I don't remember seeing very much of my mother after that day. Because shortly afterwards I had occasion to go into hospital myself.

## FEATURES

# Dobbers and taws and growing up in Garryowen

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