Letters to Colorado

by Finn Deloughry

Anthony O'Brien's very fine article on "Soldier Houses" and Bengal Terrace in particular (OLJ 35, '98) brings together several strands of memory and helps reacquaint across great distances some erstwhile Bengaller contemporaries.

Though my family did not live in one of the fifty houses of the Terrace, but opposite in Spittalland, among our many friends and good neighbours were the residents of those houses.

After a long lapse, John Meagher (now of Arvada, Colorado and formerly of 23, the Terrace) and I have been exchanging reminiscences of late, and these Letters to Colorado extracts are offered by way of a portrait of the Terrace at a particular time in its development.

Gallivanting & Roving Blades

Consider, John, the peculiar origins of Bengal Terrace. It was the product of an organisation always spoken of as the "The Trust", with the object of providing housing for Irishmen who had served the British forces in WW1. Obviously, it must have had the Irish government's approval. Limerick, most notably Irishtown, had its teeming slums and, as yet, little or no public housing so that a scheme like this must have appeared a godsend to the corporation.

That is not to imply that the terrace's first residents all came from Irishtown. I am simply saying that it probably proved a pioneering development for later actions aimed at relieving the execrable housing conditions then existing in the older parts of the city.

I do not know what the criteria were, exactly, for the selection of the Terraces first occupants, other than that they should be ex-servicemen of the British forces with families. I'd wager the application list was over-subscribed. Thus, the very first children in the Terrace would have been born elsewhere, before they became Bengallers. A reasonable assumption? I labour the point because I suspect this feature of the families added something to the place's character, as we, you and I and our immediate crowd, were later to meet it.

Ah, Irish families of the time! Some relevant observations: usually large and of an extensive age-span between eldest and youngest siblings. So wide an age range, in fact, that something akin to a generation gap could separate first and last. I cite this from an impression I gained during my own growing familiarity with the Terrace's community. For instance, when I got to know its people, there were families whose older children were no longer living at home because they 1. were married and living elsewhere or, 2. had emigrated, or 3. in few cases, had entered on the religious life.

By 1939-40, when I began to know it, part of the most senior cohort of children was missing and some of them were names, already recounted memories, indeed, as part of the place's street mythology. For some, it already had had its golden days – and that after barely a decade.

In effect, by the time of our entry into its small society, the second cohort of youngsters was in its prime. We, you and I, were at the tail-ends (no innuendo intended) of our respective families, you second-last in yours and I last in mine. For proper perspective, family place-order is very important for our developing tale. Older brothers and sisters and their friends initiated us into the ethos of the Terrace and the pleasures of its wider hinterland that we, in our turn, were to make our own :

As long as I remember I never will forget
To carry an umbrella when the days are wet.
Up around the mountains, that's the place for me,
Listening to a billygoat whistling on a tree.

So ran the first song of Bengal Terrace, taught a tiny me on a saunter along the 'first line' one eternal summer evening, with Michael, your Paddo and Tom, Ames Aherne, Paddy McGrath and a few other big fellas who are now no more than towering, nameless silhouettes in my present memory. That grand company was a fine commingling of high- and low-Bengallers, note.

On the way out of town, the open country began after the last house in the Terrace, Ger O'Connor's. No, not quite. There was Hanley's farm on the right and then there were two bridges, the first bearing the railway line to the Junction and beyond, to Cork and Dublin. Between the bridges and on the right was Neville's field. There was no one of that name connected with it in our time. A Gárda, Dalton, had an allotment near the apex made by the separation of the lines to their respective destinations.

It strikes me now, with a kind of extrapolating hindsight, that the field had been turned into a sort of no-man's land by the building of the railways, which required the lowering of the road-level for the bridges and thus giving the road its high fringeing embankment which, though, was no hindrance to us when we wanted to climb up to the field.

You will remember all its hillocks and undulations, surely made by the dumping of soil as the 'permanent ways' were driven through. Plentifully grassed over by our time, I remember us slapping our flanks and riding bravely into the west of many a game of 'cowboys and Indians,' over its terrain. Remember our guns? Colt 45s made from jawbones, the mandibles of the boiled sheepheads the Slatterys, opposite, fed to their greyhounds. We were marvellous improvisers. We out-Mackeyed Mick without hurleys and we shot a mean slug from the hip, without weapons. Wonderfully inexpensive and wondrously stimulating to the imagination, material want! Should it surprise you, John, your ending up in Colorado; you, "the fastest gun this side west of the Mississippi?"

Another feature of the field was its "mad-man's onions," of course. Wild (feral?) garlic, I presume. Oddly, the plant was confined to the narrow strip just along the high roadside edge and it re-appeared each year, however much of it we pulled. Was it a crop the eponymous Neville grew in the field, all those years ago, before the railways? An amazingly persistent vegetable, whatever its origins. We were tempted to taste it from time to time but Seanie Bourke was the only one of us who actually enjoyed eating it, raw and in quantity. Even as a small boy, Seanie was eccentric. In our games of 'cowboys and Indians' he incongruously insisted on being Baldy Conan! But that is another tale.

On the steepest slope of Neville's highest mound we tobogganed. Once more, there was no need for the 'indispensables.' As with hurleys and guns, who needed snow or sledge when a piece of plywood or the mudguard of an old car could suffice for sliding on luscious grass?

You'll remember the mound, with the gridded pylon that surmounted it. I recall, as a very small boy, taking very much to heart all the warnings of our parents against climbing such pylons. Though they never went right to the top, some of the bigger fellas, including our Billy and Col McGrath, made their way too far up for my comfort of mind.

Soon there came an evening when, with my mother and some other women, I went for a walk along McDonagh's boreen. We had gone to look at the newly opened 'plots' on what used to be Richmond's (?) rugby field and recently granted to people of the town for the growing of vegetables, just after the outbreak of the war. (We were not going to have another "Hungry Forties," was my mother's reception of that enlightened policy.) Suddenly, there was a loud crackling sound in the air. I looked in the

direction of the noise, across the plots and the intervening railway lines beyond the second bridge, to see a dark figure falling from the next pylon along, in Hurley's field.

Immediately, I got it into my head that it was our Billy. My mother did her best to reassure me. It could not be our Billy. Whoever it was, he wore short trousers. She had seen his bare knees as he fell. It was some comfort because I knew our Billy was in long trousers. I had to be told it over and over, though, before I was convinced.

There were many people about that evening. A group of big fellas, our Micheal, your Tom among them, were playing handball under the second bridge. Soon, there were figures on the railway line. Within a remarkably short time, a group of girls from the Terrace arrived, accompanying the distraught Mrs. Halvey. How they were so certain it was her son, Gilbert, I do not know.

They had run back into the Terrace to bring her out. The odd thing was that they brought her into the boreen, on the wrong side of the railway lines. I retain a vivid image of Mrs. Halvey desperately running across the plots and trying to get over the wall onto the railway. My mother and the other women went to comfort her and take her home. Gilbert's death lay like a pall over the Terrace for a long time afterwards. It was a dearly bought salutary lesson for the rest of us against climbing pylons.

Mention of the war, 'the emergency', reminds me of some of its more peculiar repercussions among the old soldiers of the Terrace, who discussed interminably every scrap of news about it. Households suddenly found the means to acquire the luxury of radio. I recall the gloom that could descend with every British setback – and there were many at the start.

To heighten the sense of the war's immediacy, there were two families, the Sullivans and the Whelans, with sons in the British forces. As neighbours, their welfare was everybody's concern. If my memory serves me right, Willie Sullivan was one of the few survivors from the sinking of HMS George V. Charlie Whelan, serving with the 8th Army in North Africa, was wounded. That they both survived the war was proof positive of the strength and efficacy of prayer to the women of the Terrace.

Their direct involvement made us anti-German rather than pro-British. Our fathers had followed with keenest interest the events of the inter-war years and understood WW2 in terms of the German militarism that had brought about the war in which they had served. They were by that experience Europeanised, in a sense. Small boys listened and learned. They could not share the *Fíor Gael's* satisfaction at Britain's problems, however closely they shared in his cause of Ireland's reunification.

Even then, the war could have its lighter moments for us, as exemplified in the rush to build air-raid shelters. Perhaps

Sean Bourke (left) with his brother, Liam, and Ger Nash.
(Limerick Museum).

it was the effect of the persuasive urgency emanating from the B.B.C. on their newly acquired radios that set the heads of the households at numbers 43, 44, and 45 to their hurried construction work.

There was an element of good-humoured competition between John McInerney (sen), Tim Nash (sen) and Jack 'Banger' Sullivan. They were the only three, as far as I know, of the Terraces residents who took the matter entirely to heart, so that their evenings of digging, covering and earthing-over became something of a spectator sport for fascinated small boys.

Aesthetically, John Mac's and Tim Nash's shelters were equally impressive, each cleverly achieving the illusion of uninterrupted surfaces in their respective back gardens; pits planked over and covered in soil with, in one instance, strawberries growing on top and atop the other, lettuces. Perfectly camouflaged from the bird's-eye view of any Luftwaffe pilot come so far west in search of a strategically important target, they were, surely, beyond detection.

Except that, according to Banger, they shared the serious flaw of being situated too close to the houses whose rubble, if they should be hit, would collapse on their shelters and bury their occupants. Unlike them, he was making his at the bottom of the garden and farthest from the houses. No falling masonry was going to endanger him and Bridgie.

All this was received in deadly earnest. John Mac and Tim Nash could see the sense of their neighbour's argument. Heights and angles of collapse were gauged and the two concerned men took much time before persuading themselves and each other that they were just within the margin of safety. Or, rather, outside the zone of danger.

Banger, observably, was not the competently practical master-builder his advice to his neighbours purported. They were finished when he was only starting the roofing stage, spanning his pit with the unlikeliest of covering materials, one arching item being an indigo-coloured door, still in its frame. Even small boys could see that this was jerry-building at its worst. We had all been to the pictures and knew what a direct hit could do. Only an Errol Flynn – or a Laurel & Hardy – crawled out of structures like that.

We watched him earth it over until, at last, it was done to the Banger's satisfaction. He lowered himself into its depths, having forgotten to cut steps, and disappeared from view. We heard him call out in self-congratulation at his own handiwork. Then his head reappeared and, as he made to struggle *de profundis*, his back caught the timber that was his entrance's lintel. The lot caved in.

The indigo door had opened, depositing its covering of soil into the pit. Banger struggled clear, to the "we-told-you-so's" of his critical neighbours. Tim, especially, was scathing of his miserable efforts, to which Banger with "can you do this, Tim? Can you do this?" cartwheeled along his garden path, full of the joys of life. Not bad for the veteran of the Boer and Great Wars. Watching wives looked on and kept their silent counsel and small boys knew that they would sorely miss the fun, now the urgency had receded.

Then there was the Sunday afternoon when some small boys betrayed their country. The Irish army and Local Defence Forces were engaged in joint exercises over the fields nearby, in simulation of an invasion and its repulsion. A gang of us were up the Back Road, birdnesting and met a group of soldiers huddled outside Kelly's field. We made out that they had located the 'enemy' on the facing slope of Blackguard Hill, off in the distance. The very nice officer allowed us turns to look through his powerful field-glasses. There we were, on the edge of Southill, with a clear view of the movements on the opposite hillside.

This was exciting! Could we join them at playing soldiers? Ah, why not? Always keeping a hedge or a wall between us and the enemy, we led them down to McDonagh's boreen, through the fields, skirted the brickyard across the Ballysimon Road and negotiated the Groody River at the Blood Mill. Easy for us, who had birdnested, blackberried and mushroomed every field of the intervening terrain. We knew where the gaps were in the hedges and where the drainage ditches could be jumped with ease.

We won! We had helped capture the enemy field headquarters. It was only then we learned that we had been guides to the invasion force which we had met making its way inland after, hypothetically, coming up the Shannon. But I'm sure some salutary lessons against a future 'real thing' were assimilated from the exercise. I wonder if we got mentioned in intelligence reports! Somewhere in a mouldering archive we should be there, probably filed under 'Debâcle.'