Letters to Colorado

by Jim 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 Bengal contemporaries.

Trust”, with the object of providing reminiscences of late, and these Letters to friends and good neighbours were the across great distances some erstwhile strands of memory and helps reacquaint the Terrace) and I have been exchanging portrait of the Terrace at a particular time in its development.

Callowblowing & 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 first residents all came from Irishtown. I am simply saying that it probably proved a pioneering development for later actions.

That is not to imply that the terrace’s first occupants, other than that they were ex-servicemen of the British forces with families. I’d wager the relevant observations: usually large and of application list was over-subscribed. Thus, 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 summer evening, with Michael, your Paddo and Tom, 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 fringing 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 Slattery’s, opposite, fed to their greyhounds. We were marvellous improvisers. We out-Mackeayed 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 Bally 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 cracking 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 boren, on the wrong side of the railway lines. I retain a vivid image of Mrs. Halvey desperately 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 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 Bridge.

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 competent practitioner master-builder his advice to his neighbours purported. They were finished when he was only starting the roofing stage, sparsely covered 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 edging over a little, in the 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, exaggerating the sacrifice 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 to look through his powerful field glasses. There we were, on the edge of Southhill, 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. From then on we learned that we had been guides to the invasion force which we had met making its way inland, 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 'Debacle.'