

The life and letters of Feathery Bourke

"Feathery was so mean he made Scrooge look like Santa Claus". — Sean Bourke.



MARRIAGE, ROBBERY, MALNUTRITION AND DEATH

Feathery Bourke's marriage came as a big surprise to his neighbours in High Street and Cornmarket Row. Once again his brother-in-law and business adviser, Leonard O'Grady played a part in the matter. When he first came to Limerick, Leonard O'Grady had stayed in the same house as a woman named Maude Guerin, before he married Feathery's sister, Annie. He introduced Maude Guerin to Feathery and, after a fifteen-year friendship, they got married in 1945. They were both nearly fifty years of age, and the marriage was more a business arrangement than anything else. They got married secretly at St. Michael's Church, after 8 a.m. Mass. Two hours later Feathery was back in his shop buying and selling scrap.

Feathery was not over-generous to his wife and kept a tight control over her few financial transactions. Money and food were strictly rationed, and both lived in frugal circumstances. Many stories are told about Feathery's relationship with his wife. One such story describes a novel method devised by him to husband their household stock of tea. Every morning, following breakfast with his wife, and before his departure for the scrap store, Feathery would go through a carefully thought out, secret ritual. He would catch a live fly on the kitchen walls and let it loose inside the tea-canister, firmly replacing the lid. On his return to his home at lunch-time Feathery would immediately check to see if the fly was still buzzing around inside the tea-canister. If the fly had escaped, he would know that his wife had made some tea for herself in his absence and would sternly admonish her for doing so. A good story, but hardly a true one.

Part Three

by Jim Kemmy

Poor Maude had a hard life. Holidays for her were only a far-off dream. During wet summer days, when she would come into a shop, she would console herself by saying: "It must be miserable to be in Kilkee today".

After about six years of marriage, Feathery's wife died.

In a prose work in progress Desmond O'Grady has described the assorted furnishings of the house, and the haunting scene in the death-room.

The bed was the bed my grandmother had been born and died in and Mykey Bourke had slept in it since the day they took her away in her coffin.

After he married, Mykey shared the bed with his Maude. The bed, together with her nickname, were the closest contacts Mykey had with his mother and the past.

There was not much else to the cottage: a thumbnail of an entrance hall, a small sitting-room with open fireplace, and a kitchen. There was also a cubby-corner of a maid's room stacked high with old newspapers and bundles of the **London Illustrated News**, the **Jewish Chronicle** and a magpie assortment of paraphernalia hardly worthy of a pawnbroker's attention.

Mykey was a collector and a hoarder.

In the sitting-dining room stood a bookcase heavy with eighteenth and nineteenth century texts on medicine and medical machinery, devices and inventions, on physiognomy, plant life and silverware, as well as an eight volume **History of England** printed on Indian paper in double columns. Mykey read this **History**, year after year, from beginning to end with the aid of a large hand glass, starting again almost automatically at page one, volume one when he had reached the last line of volume eight.

Because Maude and Mykey had no children — either by mutual consent or because they married too late — they had no need for any more space. They had plenty of privacy as the cottage — once the gate lodge of a big house — was set in several acres of woodland, rough lawn, and paddock planned in the natural wild style of Irish gardens. This was Mykey's property. Through it ran a driveway to the coachyard of the big house itself.

The big house was our house.

But tonight all these things, this security, the guarded family history, were being threatened. In a sense they were coming to an end. From now on, because of progress and change, children growing and scattering, the fluctuations in material values, everything here would be different, would go back to what it had once, and for a time, been saved from.

Maude, lying there like a bundle of wattle sticks under the bed clothes, looking out at the three of them, was living her last hours dying of cancer. Mykey, Father and Mother were watching her die. I was watching the four of them. Mother sitting on one of her own grandmother's chairs. Father standing, like the outsider he was, looking in and Mykey, with a broken rosary beads clutched in his fist, squatting on what, with closer inspection in the gloom, could be seen to be a black coffin.

Maude lay severely watching them watch her die.

The funeral of Maude Guerin, like her wedding, was a quiet affair, with only the same small number of people in attendance.

After his wife's death, Feathery withdrew further into himself and continued to live a spartan existence. His relations with his three brothers and two sisters had never been easy. When one of his sisters got married she badly

Memo from

L. Bourke & Sons,

Hide, Skin, Feather, Metal and Sack Merchants,

40 HIGH STREET,

LIMERICK.

CURLED HAIR,
HORSE HAIR,
BRASS, LEAD,
COPPER, ZINC,
SACKS OF ALL
KINDS.

To

needed a house and Feathery was able to take advantage of her plight to sell her one of his houses. Rather than be under a compliment to his other sister, who lived next door to him in Cornmarket Row for many years, he ordered his daily dinner from the Stella Restaurant and had it delivered to his store by a messenger-boy on a bicycle.

Another example of Feathery's attitude to money, clothes and people was given one wet May morning in the early forties, when one of the seven sons of his brother, Frank, made his first Holy Communion and was doing the "rounds" of his relatives. The well-scrubbed and well-dressed young nephew called to see his uncle Feathery at his High Street store. As the eager and excited boy approached in the rain Feathery briefly glanced at him and brusquely directed: "Run along home sonny, and take off that new suit before you ruin it".

Another one of Feathery's nephews Desmond O'Grady has, from his earliest days, shown a fascination with his uncle. Throughout much of his poetry, Feathery has maintained a persistent presence. In this picture, framed in his child's eyes in the **Dying Gaul**, the poet tries to free his imagination from the dominating influence of his middle-aged uncle:

**A butty man,
uncle wore black;
had nailhead eyes,
hid in the house of himself.**

**For me, a child,
he loomed hugely homeric:
stories, history.
Yet I never heard him sing.**

**Father replacer
he outbulked mine.
Mastered my day
a long time.**

**Outgrown it
I still baulked,
couldn't shift — had
to inhume his image.**

**Shrunk now
he's silent,
and odd.**

Feathery continued to add to his list of properties and ground rents. He also kept up his business correspondence with the many people and interests involved in this field. In early July 1955 Dr. Hodges, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick, Ardferd and Aghadoe, wrote to Feathery about a matter of rent and the untidy state of the approach to the yard gate of the bishop's house at the North Circular Road. Feathery did not reply, and a few days later, on July 7th, the bishop again wrote:

Bishop's House,
Limerick.

Dear Mr. Bourke,

Some days ago I wrote to your business address asking your approval for my plan to tidy, cut grass, weeds etc., on the approach to the yard gate of this residence. I do not know how far you are concerned in such a matter but I write to avoid any misunderstanding as I know you have certain rights at the place in question.

I shall be grateful for an early reply so that the gardener may proceed with the work.

Yours sincerely,
E.C. Hodges, Bp.

Feathery was not very co-operative about the bishop's proposal to clean up the property of which he owned the ground rent. In a letter dated July 12th he replied:

40 High Street,
Limerick.

Dear Bishop,

In reply to your letter to hand of the 7th, I note its contents. I am quite agreeable to wait for settlement of rent applied for. And, furthermore, regarding your enquiries as to your duty or intentions in the back passage leading your yard, there is a separate lease dealing with this matter which your governing body has got with this property and I would suggest you inspect same.

I remain yours respectfully,
M.F. Bourke

In his further letter of July 6th, the bishop enclosed a cheque for the ground rent and attempted to placate Feathery. The gentle, almost apologetic tone of the bishop's reply is in marked contrast with the formal and crusty language of Feathery:

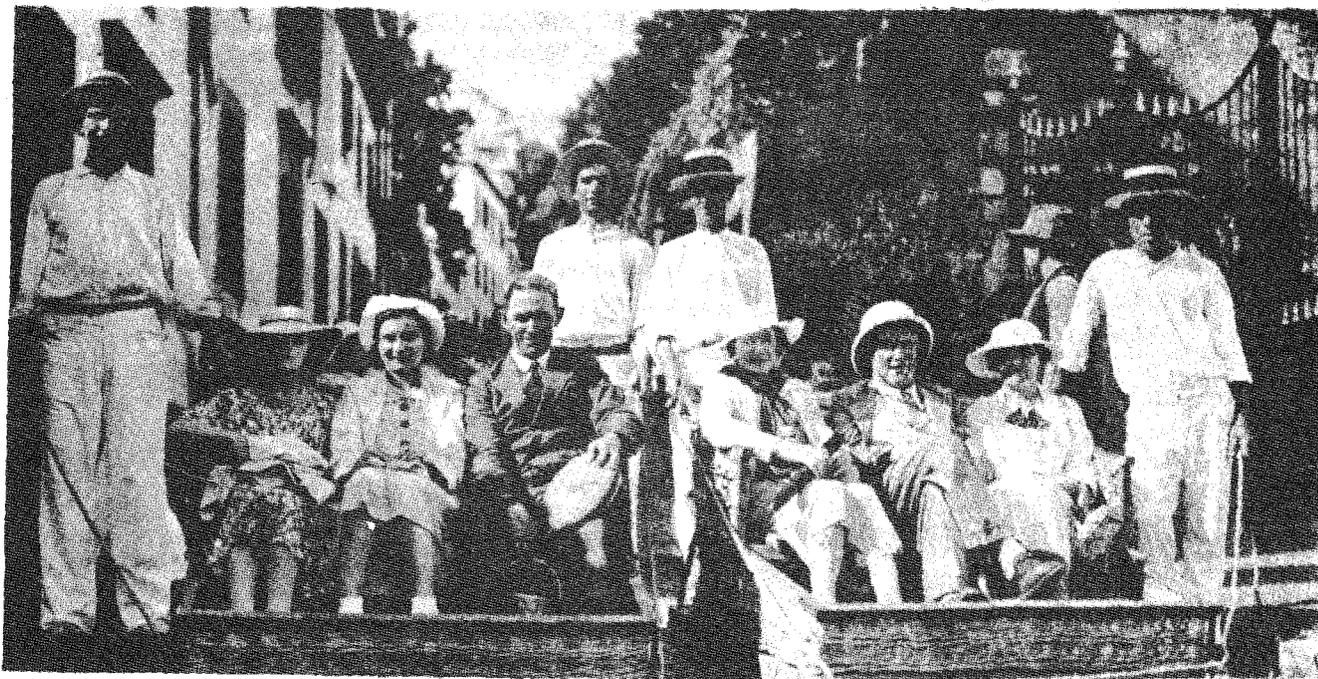
Dear Mr. Bourke,

Thank you for your letter of 12th. I now enclose cheque as per your account. I shall consult the agreement to which you refer at the Church offices in Dublin next week.

My request was not of a legal nature. I merely asked you if you had any objection, without prejudice to the agreement, to my tidying and cleaning the approach to the yard of this residence. Perhaps in sending the receipt you will let me know.

Although it seems that the bishop had a legal right to clean up the approach to the yard gate of his residence, it is unlikely that Feathery relented.

Feathery kept up his correspondence on a variety of topics concerning the property with successive bishops, including Dr. Robert Wyse-Jackson. He also conducted intermittent exchanges with the trustees of the St. Vincent de Paul Orphanage at Glasnevin, Dublin, on the amount of income tax payable on the grand rent.



Feathery Bourke and party at Madeira.

Feathery continued to work at his store six days a week, including bank holidays. He never again went on a holiday after his return from his last sea cruise in 1939, and he bought no more new clothes in the last 25 years of his life. Fifteen years before his death, he got an old overcoat for ten shillings from Tom Kett to cover the hole that had developed in the seat of his old "cow black" suit. Apart from his sea cruises, the only extravagant gestures he allowed himself, took place on the occasions of a number of Redemptorist Confraternity Retreats when, with another High Street landlord named Foley, the owner of a cheap lodging-house, he hired a "jarvey-car" and travelled in style to "The Fathers".

By 1964, Feathery was receiving an income of well over £1000 per year from ground rents and was also earning money from his scrap metal business. The district around his store was known as a tough area and was occasionally frequented by prostitutes and their clients. Some well-known money thefts, involving George Lawson, the High Street bookmaker and Thomas Fahy, a publican across the road, on the corner of Mungret Street, took place close to Feathery's store. Fahy was later killed during a robbery in his bar. Feathery, however, seems to have been impervious to the wiles of women.

While his brother Frank was an experienced and skilful amateur boxer, Feathery, despite the loss of two fingers on his right hand, was no mean performer in ejecting unwanted or drunken people from his store. During his long life, he never allowed himself to be frightened by threats from

anybody.

But Feathery suffered one serious robbery in his life. This took place at his house, Portland Lodge, North Circular Road, on January 27th, 1968, when he was 76 years old. He was attacked and beaten by three young men, who also gagged him and tied him. During the evidence given at the Limerick Circuit Court case in May 1968, when a man was charged with the robbery with violence of £1,800, it emerged that Feathery was not sure of the precise amount of money in his home safe. He



Feathery Bourke in Lisbon on 30th June 1937.

claimed to have had £2,500 in the safe and to have spent about £700 of this. All the money robbed from the safe was part of the £2,205 sum exchanged by Feathery at the Westminster Bank, London, in 1933. The sum was made up of £20 and £10 "tissue-paper" notes which had long been withdrawn from circulation. The money was, therefore, useless to Feathery and the theieves.

While Feathery had little formal education and was not always literate as a letter-writer, he had an uncanny knowledge of ground rents and property. This knowledge was used solely for his own advantage, but six years before his death he offered his advice free of charge to one of his long-time neighbours Michael O'Grady, owner of the Seven Stars Bar in Robert Street, had been seeking unsuccessfully for five years to buy the ground rent of his premises. One day, on his way home after yet another unsuccessful visit to his solicitor, he met Feathery standing outside the door of his store.

At this time McKenna's shop, which was next door to Michael O'Grady's bar, was up for sale. Feathery asked O'Grady if he was going to buy this shop. "Let me alone", said Michael O'Grady, "I can't even buy the ground rent of my own pub". "Come in, sit down and tell me all about it", said Feathery. Michael O'Grady went in and told Feathery that the ground rent was £2 per year and that it was owned by Mrs. Lena McCarthy, (nee Barrett), of the Roche's Street business family. Feathery looked at his watch and then spoke:

It is five-to-one now. . . Go home and have your dinner. Go out then to where Mrs. McCarthy lives and speak nicely to her. Explain to her that you have a big family (8 boys), and fix things up with her.

"How much will I offer her". Michael O'Grady asked him.

£30 — 15 years at the present rate you are paying", Feathery replied.

Michael O'Grady had been prepared to pay a few hundred pounds to buy out the ground rent and this small sum came as a surprise to him. He told this to Feathery.

"That's all it's worth. Don't offer any more", Feathery instructed.

Michael O'Grady went off that afternoon and saw Mrs. McCarthy. He had been told by Feathery to suggest to her that if she invested the sum offered for the ground rent (£30) in a bank loan trust she would get back more than £2 per year in interest. Mrs. McCarthy sent for her solicitor and accepted the £30 offer. Michael O'Grady also paid £10 to her solicitor and £10 to his own solicitor and walked home with the ground rent documents in his pocket.

In order to express his gratitude for this help Michael O'Grady called on Feathery shortly after this incident and said: "Let me know when you are going away on holidays and I will go with you".

"Don't you know I haven't made the price of my dinner here in the last six months", Feathery replied.

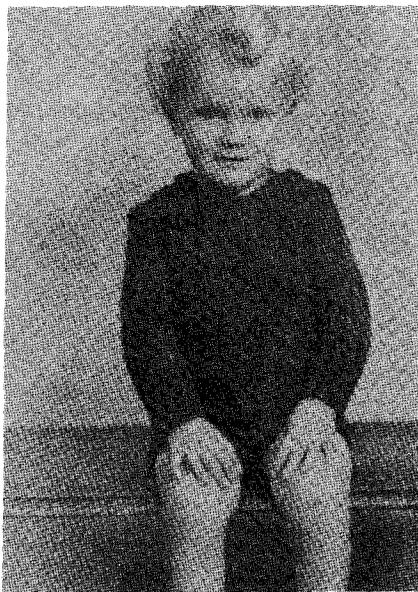
"Surely, Mikey, you should be able to take a holiday with all your money", Michael O'Grady suggested.

Feathery looked at him through his beady eyes and countered: "If you enjoy spending money like I enjoy saving it, you will understand why I don't go on holidays".

After Feathery's death, Michael O'Grady stated: "It was very hard to understand how such an intelligent man could lead such a terrible life".

In an obituary article, published in the local press on September 15th, 1973, Feathery's nephew, Sean Bourke, has given a description of his uncle in the last decade of his life.

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 the city market. Here he would sit 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



An early childhood picture of Feathery Bourke.

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 of his right hand.

When Sean Bourke first came down from Dublin to live in Limerick about 1970, he took a copy of his book **The Springing Of George Blake** along to

present it to his uncle at his High Street store. Feathery told him very emphatically that he did not want the book. "All I'm interested in reading", he declared, "is advertisements for ground rents and properties. I can't be wasting my time reading books". Then, as an afterthought, he went on: "Anyway what would happen to it when I'm gone? It would be 'blaggarded'. Just like all this". He waved his arm around to embrace the assorted rubbish piled up in his shop. "Yes, 'blaggarded', like everything else I have".

In the last years of his life Feathery became a complete recluse. His house became untidy and dirty. He ate sparingly, living on a food budget of about thirty shillings per week, and existing mainly on bread and milk. On Christmas Days he dined on a boiled egg. When he died, in September 1973, he was found to be suffering from malnutrition. He was aged 81

His funeral, like his wedding, was a quiet affair. Sean Bourke refused to attend the burial. As the hearse passed the Munster Fair Tavern, Bourke, was inside drinking a pint of Murphy's porter. He went out briefly, glass in hand, and watched his uncle's coffin entering St. Lawrence's cemetery. Bourke explained that he saw no reason why he should go to the funeral as he had neither affection nor respect for his un-



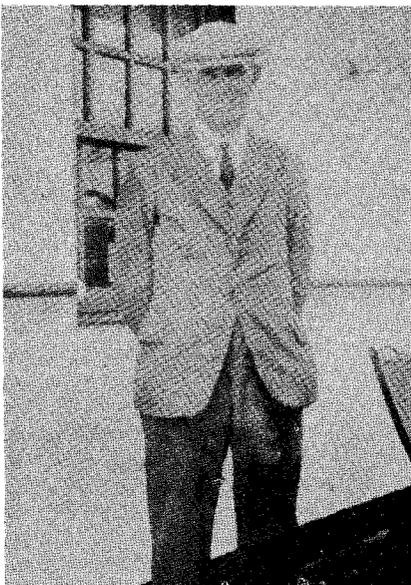
Feathery Bourke's store.

cle in life and he had no intention of being hypocritical about him in death. There were also a few other considerations involved. Feathery had refused to attend Sean Bourke's mother's funeral in 1967. When a woman from Bengal Terrace called to tell him that his brother Frank's widow had just died, Feathery told her that that was none of his business.

There was also another reason for the bad feeling between Sean Bourke and his uncle. Some months before Feathery's death, Sean Bourke repaired some electric wiring for him at the High Street store. The day after Sean Bourke returned to check that all was in order Feathery promptly ordered him out of the store. Sean Bourke asked his uncle what had brought about the dramatic change in his attitude from the day before when he had asked his nephew to help him. Feathery refused to tell him. Sean Bourke attributed this behaviour to Feathery's phobia about people being after his money and to his life-long fear of familiarity with his relatives or anyone else.

Feathery made no will, telling Tommy McInerney, a neighbour from Upper Denmark Street, "let them fight it out between them". He was emotionally incapable of making a will at this stage, since making a will involved giving, albeit posthumously, and Feathery Bourke had never given himself the habit of giving anything to anyone in his entire life.

Since his return to Limerick in 1971, Sean Bourke had shown a fascination for the spending of money, in complete contrast with his uncle's hoarding of wealth. Sean frequently gave the im-



Feathery Bourke on a sea voyage.

pression that he wished to get rid of his earnings on his book as quickly as possible. In the last ten years of his life he spent over £50,000, mainly on the purchase of alcohol. This sum is far, far more than Feathery spent on food, drink and clothes in his whole life. The nephew's expenses for one night's drinking and "treating" frequently exceeded his uncle's yearly food bill.

The bad feeling in the family continued after Feathery's death. When Sean Bourke was attempting to move into his uncle's house in November 1973 two other nephews, Tommy O'Grady and Michael Finnan, made an early morning raid and demolished the

house. They feared that Bourke might establish squatter's rights to the house and the three acres of land at the North Circular Road, and that he might later sell the property for his own benefit. They also claimed that Bourke, had sold scrap stored at Feathery's shop. Sean Bourke stated that he had intended to occupy the house to keep it from falling into decay, that he had sold the scrap because tinkers and some other people had broken into the store and stolen many of the items there and that he had only sold off what was left. His cousins, however, remained unconvinced.

Following his sea cruise in July 1937, a more humane and less forbidding side of Feathery appeared to be struggling to break out and find expression in his character. The struggle was a short-lived and losing one, however, and he quickly retreated into his old hardened shell. He devoted his long life to the single-minded pursuit of money and property. He died of malnutrition and at his death left an estimated £100,000 in land, property, ground rents and money. Through his efforts over sixty years, he had succeeded in becoming one of the richest men in St. Lawrence's Graveyard. Concluding his obituary, Sean Bourke wrote: "They don't make them like that any more". He might have added the word "mercifully".

But Sean Bourke was right. Feathery was a unique man. With the availability of more of his papers and the completion of Desmond O'Grady's study of his "influential uncle" a fuller and perhaps more compassionate picture of this formidable Limerick man should emerge.

Uimh. No. C 1243
7

ÉIRE IRELAND

Deimhníú báis ar na h-éisúint de bhun na hAchta um Chláirú Breitheanna agus Básanna 1863 go 1972.
DEATH CERTIFICATE issued in pursuance of Births and Deaths Registration Acts 1863 to 1972.

Básanna a Cláiríodh i gCeantar Deaths Registered in the District of <u>D.</u>		i gCeantar an Chláraitheora Maoirseachta do <u>Limerick</u>		i gContae <u>Limerick</u>		Éire Ireland				
Uimh. No.	Dáta agus Ionad Báis Date and Place of Death	Ainm agus Sloinne Name and Surname	Géineas Sex	Staid Condition	Aois an lá breithe is déanaí Age last Birthday	Céim, Cúlra nó Síol Rank, Profession or Occupation	Cúis Báis Dheimhniú agus Fad en tinnis Certified Cause of Death and Duration of Illness	Síod, Cáilocht agus Ionad Conaithe an Fhaisnéisora Signature, Qualification and Residence of Informant	An dáta a Cláiríodh When Registered	Síod an Cláraitheora Signature of Registrar
1	<u>1973</u> <u>18 SEPTEMBER</u> <u>Biret.</u> <u>St. John's</u> <u>HOSPITAL</u>	<u>MICHAEL</u> <u>Bourke</u> <u>Portland</u> <u>Lodge</u> <u>Limerick</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>single</u>	<u>81</u> <u>years</u>	<u>SCRAP</u> <u>Dealer</u>	<u>ACUTE MYOCARDIAL</u> <u>INFARCTION - 48 HRS.</u> <u>CORONARY THROMBOSIS</u> <u>48 HRS.</u> <u>atheroma - 10yrs.</u> <u>certified</u>	<u>SEAN O'NEILL</u> <u>Occupier</u> <u>St. John's</u> <u>Hosp.</u>	<u>SEPTEMBER</u> <u>18th</u> <u>1973</u>	<u>J. YEARY</u> <u>ASST.</u>

Deimhníú leis seo gur Fíor Chóip í seo de Tháifead Uimh.
 I hereby Certify that the foregoing is a true Copy of the Entry No. 1243 in a Register Book of Deaths in my custody.

Is é bliain an Bháis sa Chóip dheimhniúithe thuas ná
 The Year of Death shown in the above Certified Copy is

Míle One Thousand Two Céad Hundred and Seventy-three.

Oifig Seán Bourke
 Office (Superintendent) Registrar of Births and Deaths

i gCeantar D.
 for the District of

Dáta 1973
 Date

*Scríos amach an focal (idir líne) sampla n-áicteáin sa
 †Strike out word in brackets if not applicable.

Feathery Bourke's death certificate, with its inaccurate "single" classification.