

Memories of 1930s Dublin



To begin at the beginning, to be precise sixty nine years ago, I was successful in the Open Competitive exam for Clerical Officers in 1936.

Outlets for school leavers then were few. University was a no-no for the working class, although my young brother got to U.C.C. some years later, but then he was bolstered by two scholarships. The banks, insurance and larger utilities were then mostly closed shops.

And so I left the town that never reared a fool for the metropolis after the usual maternal admonitions on my Pioneer Pin, First Friday and, of course, always clean underpants in case I was knocked down and taken to hospital. There was a vague reference to strange women who walked city streets at night. On no account was I to have anything to do with them. My father, having given me the train fare, then solemnly handed me a penny. He perpetuated the perennial Cork father's joke by telling me when I got off the train, the Liffey was just across the road, throw the coin in - if it floated I was to come home at once. I took my mother's advice - some of it anyway, but ignored my father. After all, a penny was the fare from Nelson's Pillar to my aunt Kitty's house, where I was staying. She really had no room for me, as she had seven kids of her own, so I was soon thrown on the tender mercies of the Dublin landlady.

The digs area at that time was mainly the Leeson Street, Baggot Street, Mount Street district, where the majority of the large Georgian houses were lodging houses and flats. It was then I was overwhelmed by homesickness. I was weeping by the waters of Babylon, I was Publina Ovidius Naso among the Scythians. There was no going home for the weekend - apart from the cost, we worked until 1p.m. on Saturday. However, I got over it.

My first digs was 12 Upper Mount Street. Many years later it became the headquarters of the Fianna Fáil party. I shared a room with a young teacher in Westland Row C.B.S., Peter Kavanagh. His brother Paddy used to come up from Monaghan to share his bed at weekends. My first impression was that he was a bit of a fraud. His big brown boots were covered with cow dung, as one would expect from a small farmer, but his battered old hat was also literally smeared with the same substance. Perhaps he was trying to tell the "Dubs" that he was a peasant as well as a poet. "He was a quare wan I tell you".

The going rate for digs at the time was 21 shillings for bed and three meals. Although not noted for gaestatory or gastronomic qualities, the food was not

by Tadhg Murphy

bad and perhaps an over-emphasis on bullocks heart, then the cheapest form of protein known to mankind, or at least the Dublin landlady - 4d each in Moore Street. If one was peckish before bed, there was always the ubiquitous chipper. Our local was Macari's of Kelly's Corner near the top of Harcourt Street, reputedly the cheapest in town - I think 4d a single and 9d fish and chips. Bear in mind that the penny that time was the old dinarius - 240 to the pound. It was always takeaway at Macari's, as dining inside was off-putting. The knives and forks were chained to the table - one wondered when, if ever, they were washed. On rare occasions we dined out at Berni's or other popular spots, where the going price for a four course dinner was half a crown - 30d. In digs, young ladies were not nearly as numerous as men. They usually went into flats in fours and sixes. Also, there was the peculiar institution of religious hostels. I remember a big one in Mountjoy Square, another in Parnell Square. If you were seeing a young lady home, you might get tea in the big sitting room. If you had any desires on the young ladies virtue, they were soon stifled by the beady eye of the nun in the corner. Some never let a man within their sacred parlours - you had to 'whisper your sweet nothings' on the door step.

Personal pastimes

As I had just played in the Cork minor football final before I left, I was swept up by fellow Macroompian, Seán Ó Siócháin (later General Secretary of the G.A.A.), for his club, Clan na Gael. On the subject of Macroompians, there was an impromptu gathering of natives in Reilly's pub in Sandymount once a month to discuss news and gossip from home. I remember counting twenty-three one night, including John Bird (father of Charlie) and three future Secretaries of Departments, not bad for a small town. My last plug for the home town - I was recently asked for the secret of Dermot Desmonds success - easy, a Macroom father and a Ballyvourna mother - you don't get better breeding than that! As the possessor of what the Italians call a tenor robusto voice - ideal for male voice chorus, I joined the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society. Rathgar at that time was real posh - remember Jimmy O'Dea's "The people out in Fairview play tennis in their braces - thank Heavens we are living in Rathgar". Now I believe its a land of bed-sits.

Long walks in the evenings were part

of life - they cost nothing. Usually the foothills of the mountains - out by Rathfarnham, Ballyboden, Hell-fire, Tickrock house by Dundrum, all truly rural then. Around this time I won the 50 yards freestyle at the Civil Service annual championships in the Iveagh Baths. I was no Johnny Weismuller, but one could say I had a 'mens sana in corpore sano'.

Theatre

Owing to the pancy of wages one literally had to count the pennies, so it was the Abbey on Tuesday (10d instead of 1/-) and the Gate on Wednesday (9d instead of 1/3). I still recall my first O'Casey - Eileen Crowe as Juno, Cusack as the Paycock and F.J. McCormack as Joxer - unforgettable. The Gaiety, South King Street, had regular West End plays, Coward, Rattigan etc., Shakespeare with Wolfit and, of course, opera - I had my first Traviata, Heddle Nash as Alfredo, Elena Daniels, Violetta and John Lynsky as Germont - enchanting. The Royal in Hawkins Street was the home of popular artists, Nelson Eddy, Robeson etc. Does anyone remember Gene Autry, the singing cowboy. I was there the night he scattered the orchestra by piddling into the pit!

Ballrooms

The ballrooms of romance were mostly in Parnell Square. The trick here if you fancied a young lady was to find out where she lived. After all, it was no fun walking two or three miles to be rewarded with a peck on the cheek. One ploy: 'Do I see you in the morning getting the tram at Binn's Bridge' 'No I live in Rathmines' - 'Then you have a double in Drumcondra'. Now you had a basis for further planning!

Dubs

To begin with, the popular beverage was Guinness Single X porter, 7d a pint, not to be confused with Double X, 10d in Dublin, 9d in the rest of the country, which did not have single X.

The favourite pubs in the area were Grogans of Leeson Street (Tim Grogan 'a civil man with glasses'), as Joyce called him, and Davy Byrnes of Duke Street, with its famous clock inscribed in Latin 'Perenat Horae et notantur' which of course means 'The hours pass by and are recorded', which Gogarty insisted meant 'The whores pass by and are spotted'.

The job

I will not trouble you with the unspeakable boredom of the job. Suffice it to say on my

first morning, I was informed I was the new 'Cha Wallah.' Mystified, I was informed I had to plug in the kettle at 11 and 4 and dish out the tea and biscuits. This expression came from the Article 10 Men. What, you may ask, were Article 10 Men? Well, Article 10 of the Treaty said that Irishmen working in the far flung Empire could opt home to found the new Civil Service, so they flocked in their hundreds from Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Nairobi, Dargeeling and other outposts. They were a strange breed, some of them straight out of a Somerset Maughan story. At this time, 14/15 years after the Treaty, many of them had become bosses. Strict disciplinarians, they treated junior staff as white kaffers. I was called to the sanctum of one of their nabobs one day, wondering what I had done wrong, I soon found out: 'Two things, young man. I heard you whistling in the corridor yesterday - its not done. Secondly, I heard you address a messenger 'Hallo Mick'. Messengers are to be addressed by surname only.

Pay

Starting pay was £2 a week, rising slowly - a peculiar effect of the 30s depression was the absence of inflation 1918/1939. The Secretary of the Department had the awesome salary of £1,000 per annum. Comparative rates: OAP 10/-, dole 10/-, labourers 30/-, skilled tradesmen £3 per week. Living in the shadow of poverty, we were not unfamiliar with those two ancient institutions, the pawnshop and the moneylender. You got rid of your heavy overcoat at Easter, after all you didn't need it for the next 6/7 months. A favourite establishment, Montgomery's of Cuffe Street, had a special room for the white collar worker where you didn't have to mingle with the great unwashed. Our moneylender was John Ryan, Commercial Bank, Castle Street. He only dealt with public servants, teachers, civil servants, gardai etc. He let you know he knew the phone number of every Personnel Officer in the service, so renegeing on repayments could be embarrassing. I must explain, we were paid on the 16th and end of each month, so occasionally there would be a three week-end gap between pay days, when there would be a steady flow to John's on the 3rd weekend.

I recall once going with a colleague to tide us over the third weekend. I signed the form, when I was asked for my guarantor, my colleague duly signed and I got my £2. Then he asked for a loan - I signed as guarantor and everyone was happy.

Career

My undistinguished career was sandwiched by two men who subsequently gained fame in different spheres. I took over the desk of one Billie Shields, better known as Barry Fitzgerald who was then

heading for Hollywood. I handed over five and a half years later to a new boy from the Mon who many years later became number one civil servant, Secretary to Department of Taoiseach, Chairman of Bord Fáilte etc. His name of course was Pádraig Ó h-Uigin. He was a fantastic *gaelgoir*, who wouldn't speak the *bearla* to his own mother. On his first day he had been told to report to Room 31. He asked for directions "*Cá bhfuil seomra trioca a haon*". Who happened to answer was a true-blue Dub from the Coombe with the felicitous name of Mixer Hoey. "Ye'z are in the wrong shop, oul son, the Signs Company is over in Earlsfort Terrace"! He caused havoc by writing *as gaeilge* in files, confusing the Article 10 Men, who though maybe fluent in Urdu or Swahili, hadn't even "*the cupla focal as gaeilge*". Of course he couldn't be sacked or victimised. After all, Dev was the boss at the time. I believe he mellowed somewhat in later years. He is reputed, at a EU party in Strasbourg, to have sung the Marsellaise as Gaeilge and 'de Banka' in French.

Oral Irish

A bone of contention at this time, you had to prove your efficiency in the language in a series of interviews with the C.S. Commissioners in your first three or four years. Now fluency was not enough. You had to have evidence of attendance at evening classes in Irish. Surprise, surprise, who was your teacher but one of your examiners moonlighting for the handy sum of 10/- an hour. This turned many young men sour against the language, particularly when you knew that your boss was exempt from this little scam.

Major events

I suppose the biggest day I recall is 3rd September 1939. Chamberlain's declaration of war at 11.30a.m. followed by the famous thunder and lightning hurling final four hours later stays in the mind.

Another was my 21st birthday, which turned out to be a non-event. No. 1, it was Ash Wednesday, which was taken very seriously indeed in those days. No. 2, the IRA men, Barnes and McCormack, were hanged in Winsor Green Prison, Birmingham. No. 3, Archbishop Byrne of Dublin died. The cumulative effect was to turn the city into a morgue - not a pub or eating house open.

Another memory of those times was winning a monster Whist Drive in the Mansion House. The prize was £10 (5 weeks wages), with which I bought my first bike, a Raleigh, for £5-7-6. Whatever happened the then popular game of Whist and do they still make Raleighs?

Politics

The two most colourful men of the time came from opposite ends of the spectrum,

Jim Larkin and Jim Dillon. Big Jim could hold you spellbound at elections, but I remember Dillon's orotund oratory at its best during the neutrality debate the Dáil. His was the only dissident vote. De Valera impugned his patriotism, he replied: 'I'll have you know, sir, that my father, John Dillon, and my grandfather, John Blake Dillon, gave of their gallant best for this, country while your ancestors, sir, were bartering budgerigars in the back alleys of Barcelona' - Dev's grandfather sold cadged birds in the flea market.

Dev's impassioned plea to enlist to defend the country meant the army swelled to 40,000. But the infrastructure was woefully inadequate, so Dev instructed the University authorities to pass out its cronic medics without further ado. (One could stay in college for ever that time provided you paid your fees). Among the surprise new doctors was a digs mate of mine, Bill Loughnane, well known Clare hurler and later TD.

A sombre aspect of the time was the dreaded TB epidemic. Many young colleagues succumbed at the time, mostly young ladies. I believe (male chauvinist!) that they spent most of their miserable stipends on silk stockings, lipstick etc., while their male colleagues drank nourishing Guinness! By the way, I recently read that one of these ladies, a colleague, Maureen O'Connor, left two and a quarter million in her will. This was not savings from her job! She happened to marry one John Mary Lynch, then a young hurler with Glen Rovers in Cork.

Rationing

As war progressed, food rationing became grim. You remember the popular Army song at that time 'Bless 'em All'. Well a new verse was added 'Bless de Valera and Sean MacEntee, the bastard who gave us the half ounce of tea' and then there was the infamous 'glimmerman', then as unpopular as the 'clamperman' is now. He spied on gas cookers to ensure you weren't cooking outside of permitted hours. On the whole, city life became tedious indeed.

So, we had a tiny Civil Aviation section at that time but we knew they had a secret cypher office in Foynes where all flight plans, passenger lists, weather forecasts etc. were channelled through this office, secretly coded and broadcast. No other radio activity was allowed. Now as we all know, we were neutral on the side of the allies. More importantly, we heard that Foynes was a land flowing with milk and honey, where the landladies didn't ask for your ration book. Furthermore, oranges, bananas and other exotica fell off the back of aeroplanes! A vacancy duly occurred and so I left Dublin after five and a half years for wartime Foynes. Thus opened a new chapter, but that is a story for another day, I thank you for listening to my ramblings about the good/bad old days!