

AN OCTOGENARIAN REMEMBERS

BY
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Calling to mind the days of one's childhood can often be a pleasant pastime. It is natural that only the good times get the best marks. One can easily forget the hard times and the near misses of some possible fatal events. It has been said that faraway hills look green, and thus it always seems to have been grand weather in the days of our carefree youth. People talk about the "roaring twenties", and the following are a few of my personal memories.



Rutland Street and Patrick Street, at the turn of the century, showing the City Hall, formerly the Chamber of Commerce building.

Nineteen seventeen and the subsequent years of 1919 to 1926 stand clear. Over the years since, to the present day, people's names and the places where many events occurred are very clear in my mind: in previous articles to this Journal my description of life in Denmark Street and the well-known people living there in the years up to 1926 were recounted. In the early twenties, my boyhood companions and I were in our teens. In retrospect, these times are remembered as days of great happiness by the most of us. Apart from constant rain and dark nights, the winters are scarcely recalled but the days of spring and summer are never far from mind.

I well remember the unsettled political state of the country and the national struggle against the vast might of Britain. My father and his friends had exciting tales to tell of those days. A regular soldier of the British Army was cruelly beaten up by the R.I.C. one night. Unfortunately for the soldier, he was on leave and was in civilian clothes. My parents brought him into our place and did all they could for his terrible wounds as he had been bayoneted. Despite the curfew, my father took the victim over Matthew Bridge to Barrington's Hospital and no doubt saved the soldier's life.

As boys, we enjoyed long walks out to Caherdavin in our search for crab-apples to bring home for ham-making. The search involved great risks from angry countrymen and sometimes a chase by an unfriendly bull. Swimming out in the Shannon Fields was our favourite sport in the summer. If we went out along the Canal Bank, the journey was pleasant enough. Sometimes for a lark we would go by Park and, when at a safe distance, would taunt the Park boys. The dash for the Shannon Fields from the Park boys used to rival all athletic speeds, this exercise must have considerably helped the Shortt brothers, Eddie and Frankie, to attain their athletic prowess.

I would like also to mention an old friend, Victor Grimes. In modern jargon he would be described as a "whiz kid", as he was the nearest thing to an entrepreneur.

On one occasion, with another great

friend, Christopher O'Halloran, from Denmark Street, I went with Vicky on a reed-gathering mission down the Shannon. A small island in the estuary was the venue. We went ashore there and, feeling like pirates of old, took possession. Vicky cut the reeds and Christy and I tied them in sheafs. During our break for mugs of tea and sandwiches, a large ship came by and the bow wave almost caused a disaster. Landlubbers like Chris and myself were nearly swept away, as we had sat too near to the edge of a little strip of land in the middle of the estuary. A gondola belonging to Victor's father was our river transport. In the event, I remember we got safely home, somewhat damp, but with a boatful of reeds. The disposal of the cargo was dealt with by Victor, what a good business opportunist he was at his tender age of all of 16 years.

Once, when I was about to turn the corner from Bank Place into Rutland Street, two men came running past me. The next thing I saw was a Crossley Tender which screeched to a halt and a soldier jumped off and grabbed me. He wanted to know where the running men went. I was very interested in looking down the barrel of his revolver that was poked in my face. I had my youngest sister by the hand and as she started to cry, one of the other soldiers said, "Let him go". I only knew afterwards that the escaping men ran into 8 Bank Place and got away over the backyard wall. Unintentionally contributing to the escaping men's advantage, my younger brother, Chris, had run up the stairs, away from the noise and confusion and was followed by the soldiers who were well and truly berated by my mother for frightening the child.

There were, of course, many other exciting events in those days but they are all a matter of history and have been written about by better pens than mine but I have a very vivid memory of being at the top of Todd's Bow and looking at a lorry which drew up outside the police barracks in

William Street. Christy O'Halloran and I watched bodies being pulled out of the lorry and taken into the barracks. We were then cleared away by Black and Tans and only found out later that the bodies we saw were the casualties of an ambush by the Irish Republican Army. Groups of Tans afterwards came down Todd's Bow on their way to some raid. They appeared to lack discipline and just wandered along, not in ranks, but threatening one and all by brandishing their rifles menacingly. The British Army soldiers, by contrast, were friendly in a way and cheerful about their unfortunate duty of trying to impose British rule on the Irish people. Many of the soldiers made friends with the local people and often visited their homes. Several soldiers married Limerick girls. The "Auxiliaries" formed part of the British Army but were not friendly. They were a swaggering 'macho' type of hillbilly troops, the equivalent of an SS type force.

Looking back with hindsight, I am at loss to understand why the unequal distribution of wealth did not raise our thoughts to the need for an improvement in social conditions. Chronic unemployment or in low paid work was the lot of most workers. Large families did not help the poor but only contributed to their inability to improve their conditions. I often wonder why these impoverished men and women did not try to solve their problems by mass agitation as happened in most European countries with similar problems.

I frequently reflect on the fact that I was born in the last year of the first decade of this century and that I am now in the second year of the last decade. I have vivid memories of our own War of Independence, the subsequent Civil War, the two World Wars and the social upheavals, strikes and the variety of governments in both Ireland and England, and most vivid of all, are my memories of my boyhood days by the Shannon, nearly eighty years ago.

