Dave Flynn was born in a house on a hill over the village of Mountcollins in the county of Limerick. He was the eldest of what was to be a very large family. The townland in which he was born was called the Gate. It was a small townland, on a hill, in hill country. It encompassed a few miles of countryside that at that time had only four or five houses. Most of the townlands in this upland, remote area had, and still have, Irish names. It was, and still is to a certain extent, a very traditional and Gaelic part of the country. Up until recent times, and indeed in the very time of writing, words from the Irish language live on in common conversation and sprinkle common speech of the people. The last native Irish speaker in the area, the Tailor Roche, only passed away in the early nineteen sixties.

This gate that gave the little townland its name was something very practical. It was erected to prevent cattle from straying from as far away as Knockulcare. Jack Mickeen would come near the village and from as far away as Knocknagow. He would bring tunes out of it.

We'd go to an old dance and we'd hear a new tune, and we'd go home to bed and maybe in the middle of the night that tune would be running through the head and we'd get up and try playing it. We'd whistle it low and we'd get up and come down the stairs and play that tune. My father and mother would take no notice of us, and we'd play it again so that we'd remember it the following day. It was no bother to us to pick up music. We only have to hear it a couple of times and we'd know it. You could find any instrument in our house from a balalaika to an accordion.

We'd try to play anything. We could knock out music out of a tin whistle, or a mouth organ. We often played for sets with the mouth organ. We often played for sets with the mouth organ. The dances in those days were mostly polka sets, eight hand reels, The Girl I Left Behind Me and Hurry the Jug. I used to play all of those on the mouth organ.

My mother kept her books in an alcove under the stairs. I can't remember the books that she had. She used to read the old writers: Dickens, Canon Sheehan, Mrs Henry Woods, Sir Walter Scott. I started reading very young. I think the first book that I read was "Knocknagow or The Homes of Tipperary." We used read cowboy books, of course. We all thought we were cowboys, in our young days. We couldn't get enough of them.

We had an open fire for a long time. I remember when we put in the range. My mother never liked it. She used to call it "that lump of iron." She had no means on it at all. We had great times with the open fire. There was a long old stool near the fire. All the neighbours would come rambling at night. They would come from the village and from as far away as Knoickale. Jack Mickeen would come and Mick Jumber Curtin. A whole slate of them. Everyone would have to sit around the fire. Any tune you'd want to play, she'd
diddled it. She would jig it away to herself in the corner. We often danced to the diddling of my mother and of others that would be in the house. We used to spend a lot of time at my mother’s house.

But we used also go from house to house singing, singing and dancing. We used to go to Paddy Begley’s house at the Glosna. Paddy used to play the fiddle. Sometimes we would carry a couple of girls with us, and there were two daughters of Paddy’s who were good dancers. We would dance there until eleven or half eleven and we would come home again through the fields in the dark. We have used to cross swamps and boggy patches and we did that without any flashlamps or lights. We were like owls in the night. This was all when I was growing up. We used tell fairy stories and ghost stories and some of the young people would be afraid as they believed in ghosts and fairies. Then we would run through the bog and throw up balls of phosphorous light. The phosphorous would light up the sky in a ball of light every time we would throw the billycan with the heels of our boots. We would frighten the lives out of some of the boys and girls, who wouldn’t know how we did it. We had to make our own fun. But, I think, we enjoyed ourselves better than the young men of today. We had no pressures on us in those carefree days. Life was simple. Those were the happiest days of my life.

My mother used make squares on the griddle. She would put in a pinch of yellow meal through the flour. We used eat them hot off the griddle with tea or milk. Ah sure they were grand. You wouldn’t be hungry for hours after them. Sure you would get nothing like them today. You would eat them with butter if you had butter. But if we hadn’t the butter we would eat them without it. Lovely hot squares.

My uncle, Mike, had spent more than forty years in England. He was a navvy, a long distance man. He travelled all over England, Scotland and Wales, following the work as it went from one part of Britain to another. He worked with all the big contractors. He came back to Mount-collins when he could no longer do the work and he lived in the house at the Gauche. After all his hard work, he did not even have a house of his own.

When I first went to England, the long distance men were fading out, but they were still to be seen on the road. You would always know them. They wore the moleskin trousers. They had leather straps under their knees to keep the pants pulled up so that the knees of the trousers would not get worn. They had their handkerchief on a bit of a stick and they would have their grate inside in it. They would usually wear a coat with a big pocket, known as a moocher’s pocket. This was a big, inside pocket, the whole lower part of the coat would be taken up with it. They used to carry in it their shaving gear and all their worldly goods. All was carried in that pocket. They traveller from one town to another. Sometimes they jumped a train. Then the railmen would try to get them off. But generally they walked from one town to another. There would be stops along the road. At spring wells, they would get water. They would leave their billycans there sometimes, hanging on the branch of a tree. It would be left there for the next person that would come along and need a can. They would know that others would be on the road and coming to the same place and they would leave vessels and cooking utensils at the well. They usually carried with them a little pot, a warmer and a small saucepan. With these they would make the shackle. They would go into a butcher and buy or beg some scraps of meat. Then they would go into a garden and steal a turnip or a head of cabbage and some potatoes. They would then make a stew out of the meat and vegetables. They would have a big feed. That is what they called the shackle.

Things were very bad in Ireland and in England and in 1901 I went to England in the 1930s. When I first left Ireland I had no idea about the country at all. I had not a whole lot of money, and I was not long over when all the money that I had was gone. My first and hardest time was getting a job. I had served my time as a mason but I had not fully served it. So I thought, we enjoyed ourselves better than the young men of today. We had no pressures on us in those carefree days. Life was simple. Those were the happiest days of my life.

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my trade. I was a journeyman mason for years, and it was the old stonemasons on the road who taught me my trade and it was from them that I learned the fine art of stone.

There are a different type of people around Mountcollins now. They are more affluent, more independent. When I was growing up, very few would have a bicycle. Now they would not walk a mile or two without getting a lift in a motor car. Nobody had much in those times. But they were very good to each other and they shared. I would have one thing and they would share what they had with me; in regard to everything you owned, food, cigarettes, everything you owned. We all helped each other. Now they are too proud. They would be ashamed not to have it. They were a better people when they did not have a whole lot.

We had to make our own amusement. There was no radio at that time. I remember the first gramophone. I was always able to keep myself amused. We would meet in the evenings. I would be on the lookout for a musical instrument. If I got one, we would have a dance. We would dance a set or a waltz, or whatever took our fancy. If we did not have a musical instrument, we would dance, or diddle or whistle the dance music. We would stay in a house until about eleven o'clock, after that we might have been outstaying our welcome. Of course, there was no electricity in those times in the mountainy country that we lived in. Nor were there any roads. So we had to go home through the fields. That was no trouble for us at that time. We were well used to it. We would go through the fields and never lose our way at any time of the day or night. We had eyesight as good as the foxes. It was something we took for granted at that time.

House parties were a regular happening in our part of the country for many years. It was often a means of raising money for an individual, or a family, who were in straitened circumstances. There would be an entrance charge at the door. The raffle could be for any one of a number of things: a goose, a pig, a bonham, a donkey, an alarm clock. The older people would go up in the room to play the cards. These would usually be games of 41 or 45. The card players would often spend the night playing the games, late, late into the night. Finally one of them would win the prize, the bonham, the goose, the sum of money. If the prize was won by someone who did not want it, he would put it back in again and it would be played for at another raffle in the parish.

The young people, for the most part, would take no interest in the card playing. They would spend the night dancing in another room of the house. They would have come for the dancing. Local musicians would turn out for the night with their instruments: maybe an accordion, a fiddle, a humble mouth organ or just puss music, music made with the mouth,
or doddling. The dance could go on until two of the clock in the morning. The poor woman, and she usually was poor, who held the raffle would have a busy time the following day cleaning up the house. But we never thought of that. We were young and we could dance all night. There would be no great spread on such nights. We would drink the tea and eat the slices of bread which would sometimes be liberally covered with homemade jam. We would enjoy the night. The old people would enjoy the cards. In those years, there were not many nights of the week that you could not go to a house like that. Such nights were held all around the hill country. But when the dance halls were built, the house dances died out.

I remember the dances from these times. There was the eight hand reel, the twelve hand reel, the polka set and the accordion, an old type of instrument. But I did not have any music. I heard a tune a few times we learned it. Of course, we were listening to other players, that we could knock music off. We would try to play any instrument we knew. I was once up at Ovens, near Cork city, and I was looking for a job. I thought I got my training in England for keeping on the road, doing the journeyman. I was kept on the road myself when I came home. The work was starting to get good in the towns and cities, but in the country places there was not much doing in my line of business, stone masonry. But I still went from town to town following the trade.

I went to Ovens once and I met there some of the west Kerry boys. I hadn’t a bob in my pocket and I was feeling hungry. I saw this old bridge crossing a river and I said to myself that I would sit down for a while and rest in the shade of the bridge. I was cycling at the time and I rested the bicycle against the parapet of the bridge. My back was towards the river and resting against the building. Then I heard a splash and there were two fellows sitting on the bank of the river and one of them was washing his face. They were after shaving themselves in the reflection of the water in the river. No looking glass. Just looking into the water, I went to talk to the two boys and I told them my story. They told me who they were. They were following the threshers. One of them had a piece of meat, a piece of bacon, in a piece of cloth a little bigger than a handkerchief. They spread it out on the bank and offered it to me. I was ravenous and I ate it and I thought it was the best meal that I ever had. They had been given the food by the last farmer that they had worked for when they were leaving and they would be fed again by the next farmer. But it was the season they were working in the area. They were seasonal workers following the threshing machine and later the reaper and binder. They never stuck with the one farmer. They too were travelling men, men of the roads, following the seasonal work. They were like me, they enjoyed being on the road and meeting the people. They were very light-hearted men, a gay gang of men. The threshing would go on for three or four days. Then there would be a bit of drink and food and they would go on to the next farm.

The farmer and the travelling labourer had an understanding of each other. If the farmer liked one of these travelling workers he would keep him to stay for a couple of months. Some of them would, but many of them preferred the freedom of the open road. They would follow whatever they were working at, the threshing of the grain, for instance, but they would never like to bind themselves down to individual farmers. We always called them long distance boys. Men of the road who always had a fit man in those days and cycling to and from the city was no great bother to me. I was fit. There was a comradeship between the masons, a great loyalty. I remember if you went onto a job looking for work and the foreman could not job you, the masons would pass around a cap and collect five or ten shillings for you. That was a lot of money at that time. In those days, a pint of porter was only nine pence. Food was cheap. If you could collect however ten shillings on that night, you would nearly have your wages. A mason was expected to help out his fellow mason if he was down on his luck. There was a masonic code of solidarity and unity amongst the masons.

I came home to Ireland shortly after the war was over and I went back to my craft of stonemasonry. I had learned the stone masonry from my father. I would have liked to have gone to school but, being the eldest of a large family, I had to go out to work to put bread on the table for the younger members of the family, of whom there was a large number. But at this time of my life I had come to have a pride in my work. I liked what I was doing. I wanted to be the best. When I left my father, I thought I was a qualified stone mason, but I was not. It was the road that made me a mason. I worked all over the country for years and it was this that made me a true mason. It was the old masons that I met that taught me about stone, and I came to see that I was only a rubble man when I was building with my father, because that was all the building that was in that area. It was only when I went working on schools, hospitals and churches that I had to do rock face.

There was a lot that I had to learn, but I got on well with the old masons. They could speak the bearlagar and they had a great meaz on anyone who could speak even a little of it. It is a dead language and it was mostly the masons who spoke, or at least knew a few words and a few phrases, although I met a carpenter who said that he could say his prayers in it. Arrig is a mason. If I saw the ganger coming, we would shout aloud “Showerig eisigh do huidar ar do roa rua.” This meant to look out for the boss on the site. This would go along the line of workers and no man would raise his head. We had our own way of communicating in a bar. A mason might say “eisigh do dking dhiu trua cinn thu thuann for a tish.” This meant if the publican was alright for a few drinks on the slate. The young masons did not
brought the beard-logger, but the old masons had no means on you if you could not speak their language.

I worked mostly on limestone in Limerick, but in other parts of the country, I worked on quarry stone, brown stone, and green stone in Kerry. The green stone would be the hardest that you could find. You would need a blacksmith beside you to keep the tools edged. It was a wild stone and hard to dress. But there was a brown stone that was easily dressed, and the Leitrim stone was very nice to dress. You got different colours in it, brown, and various shades of red and green, and even yellow. There were a lot of quarries in the country that time, some great quarries. In later years, they thought this stone too dear and too slow to quarry. It was costing too much because wages had gone high. There was great pride amongst the masons in working these stones, but if they knew that the stones were going to be plastered, they were careless about the work because they knew that it was going to be covered over. But you pointed your work when you had jumper and jenkin and uncoarse rubble. But when you had broken ashalr, you never covered it. The mason guarded his reputation. He did not, under any circumstances, want to have a name of doing bad work. It was either a good or a bad job, and he did not want to be looking at his own bad work and, worse still, having to look at it and criticising it for years to come.

The great masons of my time were the Dohertys of Clare, the Malones and the Kemmys of Limerick, Aidan Halloran of Limerick and the Flynn's of Limerick. All these masons took great pride in their work. I worked for sometime or other in all the counties in the south of Ireland.

A lot of travelling people came around our part of the country. Many of these were good tinsmiths. The Mc Donaghs of Galway used to come to Mountcotton's creamery. They were tinsmiths. They used get a lot of work around Mountcotton. They would often spend three or four weeks there. They would be repairing milk tankers for the creamery. They were noted tinsmiths. They got a lot of work there and they were much respected. They also made covers for the milk tanks for the farmers, and the farmers would get them to make tin galls to hold water and milk. The local people would also bring in buckets and tanks to have these repaired and riveted.

Some of them, the O'Brien's, used to carry the budget on their back. They were going from town to town, fixing the Devil was in the dance halls and all that he imagined took place in them. He claimed that the devil was inside in every dance hall in Ireland. One Sunday he gave an awful, frightening sermon on the dance hall, in Mountcotton. After this thundering sermon, he went back to the hall after mass and went into Paddy's wife. He gave out to her in the strongest and most angry fashion. But she, God be good to her, shut the door on him. We came along later and we asked her what he had said. But she said that he was only looking for Paddy to build a little wall. We saw the priest coming again and we ran into the forge because we were afraid of him. Danny Horgan was in the forge. He had not been at mass and he did not know anything that had happened. The priest, still fuming, said to Danny: "Do you know that the devil is in it." Danny had this catch phrase that he often used and he came out with it: "Wisha, you don't tell me so." This, of course, further enflamed the priest who shouted: "Well whether you believe it or not, he is there." Of course, it was regarded by more or less everyone that it was a terrible thing to have a child outside of marriage. If a girl had a baby out of wedlock, she frequently had to leave her native place and go to England or some distant place to have her baby, that is if she did not put the child up for adoption. Sometimes the man stood by the girl and he married her. If that took place, it was seen as being reasonably okay. But often the man would not stand by the girl and she was left to paddle her own canoe. The priests had a lot to answer for in making it seem so wicked.

Sometimes a shotgun marriage was arranged. This often occurred when the parents of the young woman brought pressure on the young man to marry her. But it was generally thought that these were not very happy marriages, where the man was being forced into a marriage against his will. Sometimes too, threats were made to force the man to marry her, or to suffer at the hands of her relatives. There were matches made in that way but they could not be regarded as very happy marriages.

It was customary for the father to choose a wife for his sons. Sometimes he was helped by the local matchmaker. Some of these turned out to be very successful marriages, even though the couple might only know each other before the marriage. A bride would have to have a fortune to marry into a farm. This fortune would then subsequently be handed to an unmarried sister of the groom. Sometimes a lump of money like that would do a whole round of the parish and be handed on from one farm to another.

The matchmaker always had an eye
open for what he saw as suitable partners. He might see a young woman at mass. He might see a young woman in the fields or at the shop in the village, and he might see that they were suitable to each other and he would approach the respective fathers to hear what they would think and she them. They were coming up to spawn at that time in the river, in sand or in gravel. The actual poachers would be at some other pool on the river where they were safe from the eyes of the bailiff and free to snatch the salmon. We had tricks like that and we used help each other like that.

Poaching at night was for the winter salmon, but I never did a whole pile of that. I never did give in to that. The fish were coming up to spawn at that time in the river. The poachers were destroying too many of fish when you killed one of those. By killing off those spawning fish, you were cutting off your nose to spoil your face. They reckon that a fourteen pound salmon would lay her eggs in the gravel. The hen would lay the eggs in the gravel. The hen would lay her eggs in the trough in the river, in sand or in gravel. The actual poachers would be at some other pool on the river where they were safe from the eyes of the bailiff and free to snatch the salmon. We had tricks like that and we used help each other like that.

At night you would know where the bailiff was, or there would be a known poacher on the bank and he would be acting as a decoy so that the bailiff would follow him, believing that he was fishing illegally and that he would have a case against him. But the actual poachers would be at some other pool on the river where they were safe from the eyes of the bailiff and free to snatch the salmon. We had tricks like that and we used help each other like that.

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At night you would know where the salmon was because he made a scour to bed in the river. They would make a trough first and then the hen salmon would lay her eggs in the trough in the bed of the river, in sand or in gravel. The hen would lay the eggs in the gravel. The cock would be on top and he would put on the smell or whatever they called it. And they would come on either side of the furrow and they would heap the sand on both sides of it and on top of it. That is what they called the "scour." The eggs would hatch out underneath the sand and gravel if the floods did not come too heavy. That was the natural course of birth. If you had a salmon hatchery, it was done in a different way. You would fish up the brook, you would have the fish and you would be much surprised if you did not meet some fish in early March. They spawn later now than they used to at that time. That time they would all be gone back by Christmas. Most of them would have scoured and spawned by then. Now they have a later run. I do not know why. Was it that they were being put into the river at a later stage? They do not come now until after Christmas, and they do not run early anymore in the manner that the old salmon did.

The Irish language was spoken in my grandmother's time. I remember her speaking it when I was small. My grandmother and the older people, if they other wise did not want us to know what was going on, spoke in Irish, but at that time they mostly spoke English. But the remnants of the Irish language were all around us at that time. When I first went to school, we were taught a good deal of Irish, but later I went to Meinkilla national school. The teachers in that school were older and they did not know much Irish and they did not go to take the courses in the Irish language.

I often listened to Miko Russell on the radio, and Miko reminds me of the old people around Mountcollins. They sang songs. They were bilingual. They sang one verse in Irish and the next verse in English. You would never hear that now. It is a pity that they were not recorded, but we had nothing to record them with in those days. It was a great pity that these songs were not recorded in writing or in some way. These were fine old songs. The ramblers to the house would be sitting at a big open hearth, around a big open fire and those of us that could sing, would sing. If one could not sing, he would recite some verses. We had to make our own amusements. We were happy. If we were not dancing, we were singing or playing. There were no pressures on us in those times.

In those days, the river Feale was one of the best fishing rivers in Ireland. It was a grand, clean river. You could drink the water out of it at any time of the year and it was crystal clear. It was a great river for the spring salmon. There would be a great run of them. And the pike would come with the white trout in June. There was always a good supply of fish. Till sea trout come up there still but not in the same number. The salmon are very scarce in the river today, but I remember a time when I could make three months wages in one morning, and wages were not that low in that time. And I often did that with the salmon when I wanted to put a good lot of money together. Of course, this was not always fair fishing. You would fish fair when the white trout came in but the fish would be inclined to take. There were days when you would kill from three to six salmon in a day's fishing. When the river got low, we knew every rock. We knew where every salmon would lie. We could hit him, foul hook him and play him out. This would be a "stracoll," a three-pronged hook or with an ordinary fly. We often just did it with an ordinary fly and it was very simple to use a gaff. We would have a bit of rotten thread and we would tie it around the lead and we would tie the lead onto the shank of the hook and sink it down. And the feather of the fly was like the flight of a dart. It would guide the point of the hook into the fish as straight as an arrow. The feather would bring the hook around and once you pulled towards the head and got under the scales, you got a stitch in him. And then he played around the pool as if you had him by the mouth. It was harder to bring him out because he had the use of his head and his tail and it took you longer to bring him out.

But there would not be a mark on him. You would play him out just as if you caught him fair. This, of course, was most important if you were going to sell him on, as the water keepers and the buyers would examine the fish for signs of foul play and not only would they not buy him but you could find yourself in the court for poaching and illegal fishing. But you would play him out just as if you had caught him fair. You would take him out by the tail and bring him out on the bank, without any nets, only the rod and line. You could have a fairly decent living off the river.

When I was growing up, there was great shooting on Dave Lenihan's mount- ain in Caherlevy, a place high and remote. The shooting was good too towards Ballycommanne and that wild part of the country. There would be a lot of grouse and a fair share of pheasants. At that time, the country around here was full of plover and snipe. It was illegal to catch them but, in fact, they used to often net the plover. They used Indian hemp to do this. It was as strong as picture cord, it was light and strong.

They used to mount the nets in the fields, and they had a way of setting a net in a field where the grey plover and the green plover were accustomed to land. They would set their nets in these known landing places. They had decoy plover calls and they would blow into these whistles and the sound would attract the plover because the whistle imitated the call of the plover. They would place a decoy plover in the middle of the field and when the real plovers circled over the field, they would bear the false call which they mistook for a true call. They would circle and circle and then they would land in the field. As soon as they landed on the heather, the man who was netting the wild game birds.

Dublin market. When I was growing up, there was great take for pheasant and snipe. They were set for the winter."