

SCHOOLDAYS



t must have been the year of 1918 when I was paraded in my best suit before the headmaster at the Gerald Griffin Memorial School in Quay Lane. He gave me the following test:

"Now Michael, you are going up Rutland Street and you stop at the fruit-stall outside the Town Hall to buy a pennyworth of apples from the lady at the stall." He suddenly shot a question at me: "What is the lady's name?"

I knew the answer but for the life of me I could not remember it there and then. "It doesn't matter", he said but continued: "You now go up Patrick Street and at the corner of Denmark Street there is another fruit-stall with a lady in attendance. What's her name?"

Like a shot, I answered that one. I had spent a lot of my time with my Grandmother Kenevane in Denmark Street. "The name of the lady at that stall is Annie Rice", says I. "Good", said my examiner. "Now if you got four apples for your penny from Mrs Rice and three apples from the lady outside the Town Hall, how many apples would have have?"

"Mrs. Bromell," says I "that's the lady's name that sells apples and oranges outside the Town Hall". It was the name I was trying to remember and I paid scant attention to the quiz.

Anyway, I was accepted and put straight into the second class, skipping number one. Perhaps it was my ability to learn about people and places and not my arithmetic that stood me in good stead. My recital of the names of the streets had obviously impressed the examining Brother. "Going into battle is no time to be sharpening your sword" was the first bit of good advice given to me by my first master, Brother Condon, when my pencil point broke at the start of a writing lesson.

The school principal was Brother Ryan, a fine man who was well liked by all the boys and teachers.

Eventually my class ascended the iron stairs - a special feature of the school - to the senior grade. I had the honour of being allowed out five minutes prior to lunch break so that I could fill a kettle of water, light the gas and make the tea for the teachers.

Filling the heavy metal kettle and lighting the gas ring was not the "cushy" job that my schoolmates thought it. The task called for precision action - the kettle had to be carried down the long flight of stairs to the play ground to the water tap, the

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splashing water had to be carefully directed and then the long haul back up the iron stairs to place the brimming kettle on the gas ring.

My duty did not finish there. It was essential to have a match out of the box ready in hand to strike simultaneously with the turning of the gas, otherwise there would be a terrible bang. All this done one had to be quick off the mark before the classes were let out for lunch. The stampeding herd of boys would overwhelm you if you did not have a good start.

No quarter was ever given or ever asked for on the iron stairs at departure times: it was the survival of the fittest. There was never a stampede up the stairs, only always down and away from class. It was a miracle nobody was ever hurt in those rushes.

I was always, because of my "kettle duty", among the first of the group and always a clear leader across Matthew Bridge to Bank Place, where I lived at No. 8. There I had to climb up six flights of stairs for a rushed lunch.

It was an exciting life at that age. Great days indeed with our minds full of geography, history, arithmetic, algebra, not to mention reading and writing. Home-work was an extra burden - as if we did not do enough during the day at school.

Annual vacations were eagerly anticipated by all, not excluding the Brothers and monitors. We had a very good monitor called Crowe in the top class and there was another monitor whose name escapes me.

These two monitors had divergent views as to how the political situation of 1920-1922 in Ireland should be solved. The monitors could see each other in their separate classes divided by a glass topped partition and at times there would be a glaring session between them when the Brothers were otherwise engaged.

To my knowledge none of us pupils were politically motivated at that time, though I think we were all sure that Ireland was going to be a nation once again. We proudly sang our national songs at every possible opportunity. I remember "Soldiers of the Legion of

the Rearguard" a stirring tune, and popular because it was so easy to march to.

Eventually our class had to leave the school and were sent to Sexton Street. Our new school seemed so large to us, with so many classes and pupils, after our own comparatively smaller numbers. Most of the boys who attended the old, local school lived only short distances from it. The added advantage was that they could all run home for lunch. Sexton Street for Gerald Griffin ex-pupils was at the other end of the city and imposed new time arrangements for journeys and lunches. From now on it meant all day at school and sandwiches for lunch. My first teacher at Sexton Street was Brother McDunphy in Class No. 8. He was a good person and all the class were devoted to him.

My next teacher was Brother Buckley, and finally came Brother Bevan. The latter was a dynamic man and a brilliant teacher, as I realised in retrospect. Brother Bevan organised the choir for the school's great achievement, a play "The Eagle of the North". The story of the play ranged round the attempt by the English to capture the Irish leaders O'Donnell and O'Neill and to hold them as hostages for the good behaviour of the Irish towards the English under Elizabeth I.

The play ran for a fortnight at the Coliseum Theatre in O'Connell Street and was a great success. All the cast and the choir were pupils of Sexton Street. A photograph - which should jog a few memories - shows the assembled cast and choir. The "ladies" and the "girls" were boys so well made-up by the backstage people that their performances were very convincing to the audiences.

Great songs were sung with gusto and included "O'Donnell Abu" "The Hills of Donegal" and "McSweeney's Hounds". A boy named Finn rendered a magnificent solo of "The Hills of Donegal"; his beautiful voice had the audiences enraptured. The choir had the doubtful honour of including yours truly among the singers in the number three group who battled with the bass notes.

Over the years I have maintained my interest in the Christian Brothers schools in Limerick. I hope that these few stray fragments of more than sixty years ago will evoke happy memories of carefree childhood days by the Shannon for all past pupils of the schools at home and away.