

ST. JOHN'S BOYS SCHOOL

by Kevin Hannan



A view of the boys' school from the girls' yard.



Looking back through the long avenue of more than sixty years, I can see St. John's Convent Schools as clearly as the day I left them for the last time in 1926. The grey limestone walls and the great big windows contrasted sharply with the structure and fittings of the modest homes of the pupils, many of whom came from the fetid lands of Garryowen and the Irishtown. The great tower of St. John's Cathedral dominating the skyline to the north was our wonder of the world - it was just like the Tower of Babel that we heard of in our first bible history lessons. I well remember the sea of little upturned faces during playtime,

wondering in awed silence at the cross on the tapering spire so high up in the sky.

There was perfect segregation of the sexes. The boys' school and playground was small and compact, and was cut off from the girls' school by a stout iron railing and gate. A little narrow flower bed ran along the railing on both sides. A large galvanised iron shelter, known as the "shed" was situated along the Garryowen side of the yard, and a high blank wall on the southern side completed the enclosure.

The lavatories were primitive; they were just like the latrines I saw in the army camps during the Emergency. They were adequate, however, and even more so for the many boys who had never seen a lavatory. At that time there were many homes without

sanitary conveniences. The lay teachers, when using the toilets, always appointed a sentinel from the ranks of the senior infants to ensure maximum privacy.

The two nuns in charge of the boys during my time at the school were Sr. Alphonsus and Sr. Ignatius. They were two fine women who were very kind, especially to the poorer boys who were often ill-clad during the winter. They always tried to keep them by the fire, and give them a larger portion of bread than the others. The bread was distributed each morning during playtime; it was cut in chunks, usually from cottage loaves, and distributed to those eager tots who gathered around the teacher with outstretched hands clamouring for the "crusts" (the ends of the loaves).

The main attraction for new pupils was the rocking horse. This quarter life-size representation of a horse in full gallop helped to calm the fears of the infants on their first detachment from the apron strings of home. It was far more important than the grand selection of toys and models that were so tantalisingly out of reach in their wall-to-wall glasscases that divided the class rooms. While these had their own fascinations, they lost much of their attractiveness in being out of reach and *untouchable*. The rocking horse could always be rocked, even if there was no one to lift you into the saddle.

These were the simple things that made for a whole new world of interest and excitement: the boredom of the class room was to come later.

Of the lay teachers in the boys' school perhaps the Miss Killacky is best remembered. She came from nearby Rixtown Terrace and was a member of a very popular family. Her friend and close neighbour, Nan Flanagan, was also a teacher at the school. Miss O'Loughlin, from Ballysimon, made up the trio of young ladies whom I remember with gratitude.

The girls' playground was bounded on the Garryowen side by the back yards of the Penny Alms' Houses; these little cottages were endowed by Dr. Robert Frith in the 1860s. This remarkable benefactor was also the

donor of the girls' school.

Of the teachers in the girls' school perhaps Miss Keating is the most memorable, as she was a sister of the fine painter, Sean Keating. She spent the best part of her life in St. John's until she retired in the late 1940s. Other teachers I remember were Miss O'Dwyer and Miss Kennedy. The only fly in the ointment was Sr. Finbarr, the Rev. Mother - the boss who was greatly feared by everyone. If anyone ever looked the part, she did. She was a thin woman whose florid complexion contrasted sharply with the dazzling whiteness of the wimple that cut a sharp line ever so close to her eyebrows. I remember her extraordinary penetrating eyes and the way she looked downwards at a child, while still standing erect. When a small boy became unmanageable the threat of "Finbarr" usually brought him to his senses. She moved faster than the other nuns and teachers and her every movement was sharp and precise. Yet, like Goldsmith's village school master, she was kind, and was such a character that her presence was felt in the old classrooms long after she had passed on.

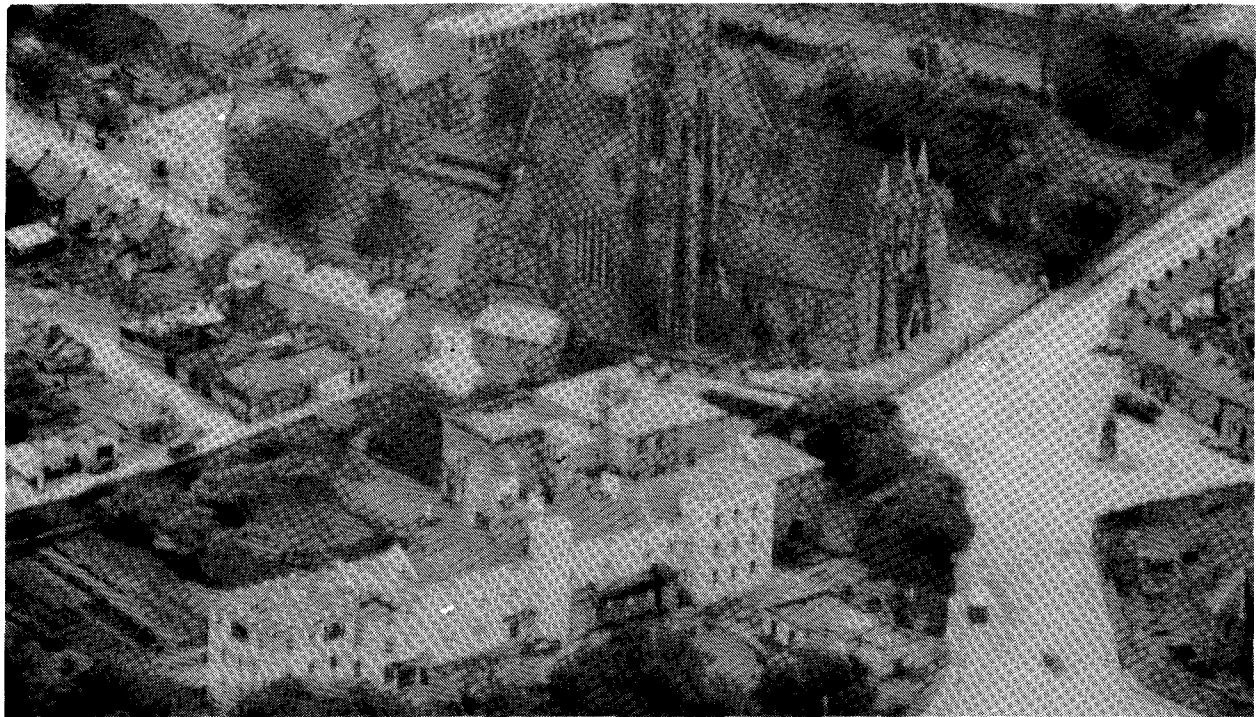
The entrance to both schools was by the postern gate at Garryowen. This was locked some time after the beginning of classes and late-comers, usually accompanied by a parent, could only enter by the front door, right at the

back of the cathedral. This practice of entering buildings by side or back doors is still quite common and goes right across the board, from farm houses to mansions. Inside the door were a number of tall glass-cases containing a selection of beautifully mounted birds. I knew nothing of the names of these at the time but I remembered them so vividly that afterwards when I brought the picture to mind again during one of my many reveries of the dear old place I saw the gold and black flight feathers of the jungle cock and the exotic plumage of Mongolian pheasants. And then there was the great snowy owl leering over his charges, just like Sr. Finbarr.

I wonder what happened to these beautiful ornaments? Perhaps they were destroyed like everything else when the fine buildings were shamefully demolished in the 1960s.

I find it most amusing to reflect on the social cleavage that was all too apparent between the common people and the nuns. There was no mixing and no communication outside the school. The Sisters regulated their daily lives as if they were specially chosen to completely ignore ordinary folk. When walking to and from St. Mary's Convent they were draped in black veils which completely covered their faces.

They were so unfortunate to have lived so long before Pope John XXIII. All my life I remembered them with pity and compassion.



An aerial view of the schools, behind the cathedral.