

# YOU WOULD NEVER KNOW

*Seán McPartlin*

WHEN HE WAS home staying with the cousin, he always tried to give the family some space. As a result, he spent a fair amount of time out of the house. This day he decided he would go up along the top road, follow a bit of the Miner's Way, and take the path that fell at his feet.

There was a sharpness in the mid morning air—a reminder that it was closer to September than July—but the sun had some heat. The patches of fuschia on the ditches were already glowing their deep red wine stains against the dark of the leaves.

He offered a small prayer of thanks to Coillte. Each time he came home, different sections of the mountain had been cleared of forestry, so he was always surprised by views down to the Lake from new or old angles.

After a while he stopped for some water. He pulled the plastic bottle out of his bag and felt foolish as he realised he was sitting overlooking a natural, silver shining, waterfall, chuckling at him as it fell down the mountain.

He closed his eyes. There was occasional birdsong and the feel of the breeze on his face. Far below, the long blue thread of Lough Allen separated the "us" of Tarmon on this side from the "them" of Ballinagleragh on the other. In the lake were Corry Island and Drummans Island, and over to his right, the brown bulk of Sliabh an Iarain, with Sí Bheag and Sí Mhor in the distance.

Smiling, he realised that he always pronounced those places with his father's voice—he had heard him talk of them so many times—always with the reverence forged by distance and time.

The constant companion in his head, the thought that said: "What if it was Grandad who stayed and his brother who had left for Scotland? What if you had grown up in your cousin's house? What if this view was your everyday view and not a summer holiday

treat?—that thought-companion butterflyed around him, making him stand suddenly and get ready to move on.

In a few places the ditch was broken by a lane, often half covered, tunneled in branches, heading downward, away from the road. As he was in no hurry, he followed some of them, led by curiosity and the joy of being outdoors with no agenda.

A couple of the openings led to freshly painted houses, positioned on graveled hard standing, the stone and its joints impossibly clear and clean, with open views to the Lake, and carefully tended garden plots. You couldn't tell whether they were newly built or old cabins massively refurbished, but the shutters on the windows gave them away as holiday homes.

Other lanes—which promised less, somehow gave more. Quickly the stone of the roadway was overtaken by the grass growing from the middle and at the sides; there was more mud than road, and at the end there was just a stand of trees, bent away from the wind.

But that was not all.

A gap in a broken down wall, the remains of a gate, a holly bush which would have provided Christmas decorations through years and generations, and, covered by the clay and the bog, the remains of a house, more like rocks than building stones. Beyond it, a lighter colour of green on the ground, and whins growing tall, marking out where the haggard had been.

These were lanes that had carried family footprints, seen joy and sorrow, youth and age, the excitement of new life, and the silence of death. It was impossible not to sense that the people of the years were still around here somewhere; he found it reassuring rather than depressing.

As he got closer to Arigna, the land changed. The ditches diminished so that the mountain came down to the side of the road, ragged edged, as if God had forgotten to finish off this part of the route. There

was nothing more than a drainage channel running alongside the tarmac, and, on a whim, he took the decision to jump over it and head up the mountain into the bog.

In the fields here were all the signs of the touch of man. The left behinds from the coal mining were all around: twisted pieces of metal that may have been axles with wheels that once carried the hutches that brought out the coal; small metal box shapes, jagged toothed machinery wheels, no longer able to turn, attached to nothing and sinking into the daub.

The earth was scarred, the colours mixed and unnatural, and yet it was not entirely unattractive. It was as if, over twenty five years from the mine's last working day, what had been brought out of the ground was slowly returning to it. The black of the coal dust was turning to the brown of rust. It suited Corry mountain better, he supposed.

He had to watch his feet as he climbed higher. The ground was uneven—there were hollows in the naturally undulating fields, and he had heard tales of unguarded mine shafts, or collapsed workings. A few times he caught his leg on something blunt and unyielding—and then, as ever, his boots would sink into the bog, the water squeezing out of the lace holes as he stamped on his way to comfort his feet in soggy socks.

The boots and socks would need to be cleaned and dried out. He never minded that; it was impossible to get the land off them completely, and he was glad of that. A flake of that familiar dried daub spotted in the back of his car in that other country could do more for his day than any amount of good news.

As he climbed, the air grew thinner, the sound of the birds became less regular, more isolated, easier to notice, and the wind was in his ears. From this height, the Lake looked majestic, somehow part of the

mountains above it. The occasional bright painted houses seemed in exactly the right places, the animals, in the fields, were toys of the landscape.

He remembered his cousin saying that there was a field on the other side of the mountain where Roscommon, Leitrim and Sligo all met in the middle. The next few minutes were lost in scanning the fields below, the patchwork of squares and oblongs and ditches following lines that made sense only to the farmers.

Then he realised, without a map, he was wasting his time—there would hardly be a signpost marking the spot!

Looking up he spotted the wind turbines in the distance, white windmills making a modern point. He knew if he started heading down the bog and kept them over his left shoulder, he would make it home.

Sure enough, he soon came upon a tarred road heading down in the general direction of Drumkeerin. The scratch of his boots on the small loose stones kept him company.

The lower the sun sank, the more dazzling the Lake appeared in the distance. Nature was strange – the Lake could help you float or it could drown you, these hills could bring great joy to the walker or shed misery on anyone lost in their wild similarities. Like people – internal contradictions: capacity for happiness and sorrow.

He was so lost in these thoughts that he failed to notice the building till he was almost level with it.

It was placed back from the road on a small rise of land. There was nothing else around it, but, at first sight he could tell it was a national school—the familiar old square shape, with a front porch extending to the entrances for boys and girls.

On second sight, it was obviously abandoned. The playground was almost grassed over and one of the doors was lying open. The windows were not broken but they were blind with dust and grime. It was wild up here, he was impressed that the building had withstood the weather.

Pushing at the door, he found himself in a large classroom. Amazingly, much of the furniture remained: desks were strewn around, a map hung from the wall between the long windows, there were light patches on the paint where years ago notices had been pinned.

It didn't look like school might be in session tomorrow—but neither did it look abandoned. The furniture seemed to date from the 1960s, perhaps, but there was no sign of vandalism, graffiti or ill use. At home a building like this would be derelict, ruined and savaged by thieves and casual visitors. Here, it felt like it was standing waiting to be used again, not closed down but quiet in the holidays.

The building was divided internally by a single wall, and in the middle of that was a door which was all but closed. He walked towards it, conscious of the noise of his boots on the wooden floorboards. He took in the black iron stove in the far corner and wondered how many pieces of coal or turf, or peat briquettes, had been brought here daily by the pupils.

As he pushed open the door, he was tempted to shout, "Good morning, class. Dia dhaoibh ar maidin!"

He was pleased he had cleared his throat instead, because, to his great surprise, and slight embarrassment, he found he was not alone. As he entered the second room, he realised there was a figure sitting in a chair in the corner. This room must have been a classroom too—the connecting door meant one teacher could teach two classes, with the help of older pupils—but, apart from a blackboard leaning against the wall, and the chair upon which the man was sitting, it was empty, with just the straight lines of the floor boards filling the space.

The man was a good age, red faced with milky eyes. He was wearing an old tweed suit with a battered hat, his hands were crossed in front of him, resting on a walking stick. There was no acknowledgement of his entering the room, so he greeted him to cover his surprise.

"Hello, how are ye?"

"I'm grand. Just sitting thinking."

"It's lovely up here, isn't it?"

"It is – and 'twas even more lovely when there were children here and classes being taught."

"Were you a pupil here?"

"No – I was an Múinteoir – the Master! And proud of it I was!"

The man's head tilted up, his eyes shone, the authority of the master seemed to enter the room.

"They say a school's not a school without the children—but, you know, they

never leave. All of them, the ones I helped prepare for life, whether that was on the farm, in the town, or for the boat abroad—they are all still here—a part of what made them who they are will always be here. That's why I come and sit here – to be with them!"

It looked as if he was going to stand up, then he sank down again, seemed to subside.

The atmosphere felt awkward. Gloom was gathering in the room.

"Well, it was good to meet you, Mr..."

"Mahon—Ignatius Mahon. The children called me Iggy—when they thought I wasn't listening. Good evening, sir!"

It felt like a dismissal, so he made his way out, quietly pulling the door shut, as if the school were still a functioning building.

Twilight followed him down the hill as the ditches got higher. There were no lights in any of the houses he passed, and he was glad to see the cousin's house with all its signs of life as he rounded the bend in the lane.

He took off his boots in the yard, and as Angela opened the door, the smell of cooking hit the cooling air. Behind him he heard his cousin coming up from the barn, the dog scratching its way to the shed where it knew a dish would be waiting for it.

"Now!" said Angela, ushering him through the kitchen and to the table, ready set, in front of the picture window that looked down to the Lake. She always sat him for the view.

"Ye must have smelled the food from up above there! Ye can tell us all about your day over the meal. Will ye have a Guinness with it?"

Without waiting for an answer, she opened the can and brought it through with a glass, setting them both down on the table in front of him.

Pat came through and sat beside him.

"Good day then? Grand weather for it – were ye up on the mountain?"

"Aye—on the top road up towards Arigna and then over the bog and round the back."

"Ye could do that and meet not a soul!"

"I came back down by the old school..."

"Did ye?"

"It's in fantastic condition – when did it close?"

"Oh, let me see – must have been the mid 70s I suppose. Sure it's out of the way

up there, nobody would bother with it. Angela - he's been up at the old national school..."

Angela sat down with her meal.

"Oh it's nice up there— Pat's mammy and daddy went there, didn't they Pat?"

"They did, yeh. It was a busy place back in the fifties — kids went there from both sides of the mountain. In those days it would be the only way you'd meet anyone from over the back. That's how mammy and daddy met— 5 year olds at school, and twenty years later they were married!"

"I never realised that— so our granddads would have gone there too?"

"They would have, yeh! It was a good school, pupils from there did well - though ye would think they'd have spent all their time looking at the views out the window. The amazing thing is - it was open for over a hundred years - and only ever had three teachers! The original was a McPartland— fierce reputation he had, even years later.

When I started school I went down in town, because the school up there, it was

quite a small roll then, and they always said it would be closing. But there was a woman teacher, Josie Reynolds — she spent her whole career teaching there — forty years. They said it would stay open while she was teacher there because they were scared if they tried to close it she would have been down in Marlborough St, giving out to the Department. Right enough, it closed the year after she retired.

She'd started in the 1930s — took over from The Master — Ignatius Mahon. He was another legend, kids were terrified of him. I remember old lads down in McGovern's shaking when they talked about him - fifty years later, but they all thought he was grand altogether."

"The 1930's? What happened to Mahon?"

"Well, he wouldn't retire, the job was all he had, they said. He must have been still teaching when he was in his seventies. And he died up there. Saw the kids out at the end of a teaching day, closed the doors, sat down, and died.

Luckily, it was a Friday or the kids would

have found him the next morning. As it was, Mossy Linehan from below, PJ's dad that would be, he was passing on the Saturday morning and saw a window was open. He went in to close it and found him. 'Twas a huge wake apparently - as I say, one of those teachers who terrified everyone but they all thought he was a great lad. Aye - they all respected Iggy. Different times!"

It was warm in the room with the heat from the stove, but there were goosebumps on his arms and sweat in the small of his back. If the echoes of children could be sensed around the schoolrooms, why not the teacher?

He took a drink and looked out of the window.

Far below, the last of the light was catching the waters on the Lake. In the gloom, it looked like there was movement, people on the water, but it was difficult to tell.

It was like that here: you would never know.



## All Ireland Champion Musician Sarah Ward

Pictured is Sarah Ward, Aughnasheelin, 2016 All Ireland Mouth Organ Champion, 15-18yrs at the All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in Ennis.

Sarah was presented with the Leo Griffin Perpetual trophy for the second year in a row. This is her fourth time overall to win the title, winning it also in 2009 and 2011. Sarah is youngest daughter of Dermot and Monica Ward.