Reflections

BRID FLYNN O'REILLY

Reflections seem to come and go,
Like waves upon a sandy shore.
The innocence, the youthful plans,
The gentle smiles, the helping hands
Of those we loved - alas now flown
To rest in God's eternal home.

Now we have reached the Autumn years,
Our life's work done - its ending nears.
Reflections that lay trapped below
Now surface–and then ebb and flow,
Until, at last, the mists come o'er
To hide from all this dappled shore.

AS ONE ENTERS the twilight years of life it seems only natural that memories of a bygone age–long buried in the mists of forgetfulness now surface and float before ones eyes. Now, at last, there is time to sit and think, to remember the events which together formed part of ones very existence.

My father's family–Flynn–originated in Drumlara near Mohill. His father, James, moved to Selton where my father–Charles–was born and where he lived until his marriage to my mother–Mary, in 1930. My mother's family came from Leitrim village..

Having come from a long line of family members involved in the teaching profession, it was inevitable that my father, his three brothers and one sister should follow in their footsteps. He taught for a number of years in St Peter's in Phibsboro before returning to his native Leitrim. He taught for most of his life in Adoon school in the parish of Cloone.

Bríd & Eugene O'Reilly

During his sojourn in Dublin my father played Gaelic football with Erin's Hope, Keatings and with the Dublin senior team from 1911 to 1913. When he returned to Leitrim he was still very much involved with GAA activities. He served as a member of the Leitrim County Board and as delegate to Connacht Council and Congress for many years.

I remember my childhood as having been happy, carefree and unrestricted in Gorvagh where we lived. Life in the country around Gorvagh in the thirties and forties was peaceful–a car was rarely seen in our area except the Ford car which was owned by Joe Wrynne who provided the local taxi-service. Horse-carts, donkey-carts, horse-traps or side-cars and, of course, the bicycle were the main means of transport. Then there was the covered horse-drawn wagon used by Tom Kelly who travelled from area to area buying eggs and fowl from the housewives–this was probably their only source of personal income at that time.

Next door to our house was Murphy's shop, from which almost all necessities could be purchased from the proverbial 'needle to an anchor'. Tea, sugar, flour, meat etc., all had to be weighed out and packaged by the shop assistants–very few goods were pre-packaged in those days. Tobacco came in slabs and had to be cut to order–there was also the blue-boxed Mick McQuaid cut plug tobacco, which my father smoked. Sweet Afton cigarettes were cheap and were possibly the most popular brand–they could also be purchased singly. Buckets, spades and shovels stood in one corner, while wool and other haberdashery occupied the shelves on one side of the shop. At Christmas there was great hustle and bustle around Murphy's. They were well-known egg and poultry exporters and many people were employed all year round but, at Christmas, the 'plucking season' started. Turkeys had to be plucked ready for the markets so men and boys around the area were employed to do this work which was carried out with great gusto so the remuneration must have been OK. The overseers of this annual jamboree were Mickey Murray, 'Barney' McGarty and others.

One of the sounds I miss most each time I return to Gorvagh is the clang of the blacksmith's anvil in the 'smith's' forge, not far from our home. The blacksmith Frank Reynolds, was a wonderful charac-

ter who had a wealth of stories to tell as he hammered away at his red-hot irons, shaping horse-shoes, donkey-shoes, gates and cart-wheels. We passed the forge each morning and evening as we went to and returned from Adoon school. It was fascinating to watch him puff the huge bellows to reawaken the smouldering embers sending multi-coloured sparks cascading up the wide chimney as the fire glowed to receive the iron which, when hot enough, was shaped skilfully by the blacksmith. One could hear the 'swoosh' as the hot iron was dashed into the cold water to cool down the finished article. The sound of loud guffaws of laughter coming from the forge still echoes in my memory as jokes and stories were exchanged to while away the time for those waiting for some job or other to be completed. The forge no longer stands–the sound of the anvil silent–only the memory remains.

Just a short distance away was the Dispensary which opened on two days a week, attended by a doctor from Mohill. My mother had the voluntary task of issuing vouchers in our house to those who had to attend the doctor.

My brother, Cahal and my sister Eilish and myself attended the school in which my father taught and in which my sister was later Principal Teacher. We walked to school in all kinds of weather while my father cycled the two or three miles there every day. There was an assistant there in my time named Mrs Madge Mulligan, who travelled each day from Ballinamore, in hail, rain or shine. I cannot remember her ever missing a day during my years at school in Adoon. Both teachers had to cope with very large numbers. I remember seeing well over one hundred pupils on roll in the early forties. In winter the numbers were increased as some older boys and girls came back to further their education for a few months. There were very few opportunities for secondary education in that area. The school was a one-roomed building divided by a large red velvet curtain in which peep-holes were gouged through or maybe the moths ate them out! One fire had to suffice for freezing cold fingers and toes–outdoor dry toilets had to serve the large number of pupils and, because of the small playground, playtime was spent on the road which was quite safe in those days as there was only the odd ass and cart to disrupt our play. Beside our school lived Mr McManus, a genial old gentleman, who always advised us that 'sugar sticks' and 'Peggy's Legs' grew in his garden in which he spent a lot of time. However we never seemed to be offered any of these delicacies as we passed by. Culture was introduced to the school in the form of Murty Curran. He was a dancing teacher who tried hard and failed to coax any talent from any of the motley bunch who braved it on to the floor for lessons. Dainty dancing feet did not sit easily in hob-nailed boots and wellingtons so the idea was abandoned–there were no Michael Flatleys in the Adoon area I think, at least at that time.

Our parish priest in Cloone for many years was Fr Peter Conefry. This noted priest was a man of great stature and personality. His visits to the school were occasions for song–those with good singing voices were requested to sing his favourite Irish songs. He loved all things Irish and as is well documented elsewhere, he revived Irish music, customs and heritage in the area. His ceilidhe band played on national radio - a great achievement in that era. His spinners and weavers of wool were well organised as was his revival of boxty-making. He held an annual Feis of dancing, music, song and Irish language for all ages in Cloone for many years. He was truly a far-seeing man of his time.

We had, as had most families around Gorvagh, a small turf-bank which provided our winter fuel. One of my lasting memories is of the day 'the master brought home the turf' each year. In return for bringing home the turf the schoolboys probably got some reward - possibly they got their schoolbooks free or some such treat! The day ended with a hectic game of football played in a local field. A good time was had by all even those of us who were just lookers-on.

Our postman, Mr Pearse, came from Mohill every day on his bicycle to deliver our letters. It was a never-to-be-forgotten day when I overheard him excitedly tell my mother at the door that 'the war has started' in September 1939.

In the years of World War II our lives continued as before although news bulletins were avidly listened to each day. It was only when rationing was introduced that we began to feel the pinch but I cannot say that the war affected our young lives all that much.

Travelling in the thirties and forties was fairly limited. Many people lived and died without ever travelling outside their own parish or their own county. However, emigration was the only option for many young boys and girls as work was not plentiful - especially in Leitrim. The first journey many young people took was on the narrow-gauge train to Dromod and thence to Dublin on the main line which ran from Sligo to Dublin. Some went to England but others had to go to America or

Canada via Cobh, in Co Cork so the journey from Gorvagh to their destinations must have seemed like a trip to the moon. They sailed off into the sunset to face the unknown. The narrow-gauge railway ran quite close to Gorvagh. There was a tiny waiting-room at Adoon where Paddy and Mrs Thomas were in charge of opening the gates to let the train through and to stop if there were any passengers to embark on it. Many a tear was shed in that waiting-room as young people said good-bye–some, perhaps, never to return. My family travelled to Dublin on the train on many occasions–to football matches in Croke Park and on shopping expeditions. I travelled on the same train to secondary school and later still to my work as a teacher in Co Cavan. From the upstairs windows of our house we could see and hear the train as it arrived at Adoon station. Many a time we watched, fascinated, with our faces pressed to the window panes as the great locomotive crunched along the line, screeching to a halt as the station-master waved his red flag. Shadowy figures moved hither and thither on the platform until, finally, with a long blast on the whistle, a few grunts and chugs and off the giant 'dragon' sidled down the track and all was silent again. Another event obliterated by the passage of time!

Ceilidhing was common in our part of the country in my young days. We had our 'regulars' who came to listen to 'According to Cocker' or 'Question Time' or 'Around the Fire'. The programme 'According to Cocker' must have been very amusing–one man was known to laugh most of the way home–about two miles–as he relived the funny parts over and over. A boxing match was a great occasion, especially if Martin Thornton or some such 'hero' was in the ring. Needless to say the football (not soccer in those days) matches were thoroughly enjoyed by all those who congregated to hear the inimitable Michael O'Hehir give his memorable commentaries on Sunday afternoons. As radios became more plentiful in the area this type of ceilidhing died off.

Pee Woods was another regular visitor–cards were produced–Whist and Twenty-Five were played for hours–and the long nights passed in a friendly and cordial atmosphere.

I can honestly say that I can never remember being bored in my young days! We enjoyed reading–the girls also could embroider, knit and do other crafts while the boys would go fishing or play football. We also went to the cinema in Mohill from time to time. In the evenings the young men might congregate at the local crossroads to play skittles or throw marbles–to laugh and chat and while away an hour or two.

Our Church stands at the top of a steep hill–a problem if one was rushing at the last minute to 9.30a.m. Mass on Sunday morning. Although we lived very near the Church we were not always first to arrive! The church was always full–people came long distances to Mass there–many walking and others by horse and trap in the thirties and early forties. Every year there was a mission there. I remember how we feared the heart-rending, over-powering sermons preached at those missions. One felt that there was little hope of redemption for many of us but one felt re-vitalised and ready to start again afresh after the mission was over. The Church is kept in pristine condition to this day and I visit there whenever I can.

Gorvagh Hall provided us with concerts, dances and ceilis as well as being a venue for meetings of all kinds. The local drama group put on many a fine play–these were enjoyed by all as were the variety concerts given by local artistes. Gorvagh boasted a fine Fife and Drum band, trained by Paddy Donnelly. As it marched along the road past our house it made a fine melodious sound. The band passed into oblivion after some years as have many similar memory-stirring local enterprises.

Our local post-office was, and still is, owned by the Wrynne family. This was the venue for all around Gorvagh to gather at some time or other. It was always a vital link with the 'outside world' and was greatly appreciated by all of us.

As time moved on and fate dictated its inevitable course, our f amily moved away from Gorvagh. Although it is a long time since I left my heart is still there.

Time cannot change the happy memories–deep down they are always there. Gone are the happy carefree days of childhood–the welcoming open doors–the friendly neighbourly visits–the card games–the story-telling -the threshing meitheals on my Uncle James' farm–the hay-making–the delicious apple cake made by my Aunt Lizzie–the visits to the spring well for water–the bicycle rides to visit my grandparents and uncles in Leitrim village–my father's guidance through our school-days–my mother's willing helping hands–the calls to Molly and Nell in the shop–the pennyworth of boiled sweets that seemed to last for ever–the almost daily visits to Selton–the joyous laughter and the innocent fun. Yes, these are but some of the reflections in the mirror of time–memories of a youth spent in a beautiful, precious corner of Co Leitrim.