

## STORIES FROM MY FATHER

*Sharon Flynn*

*My Dad, Des Flynn sadly passed away early last year after a short illness and is greatly missed by all of our family and friends.*

*It has been an honour for me to be given the job of typing so many of my Dad's wonderful stories, many of which he contributed to the Leitrim Guardian down through the years. Like many of Dad's generation, Dad's preferred method of recording a story was the pen and paper.*

*The stories were so full of Dad's rich imagination, his fantastic sense of humour, and his incredible wit. They included so many memories of his family, neighbours, and friends, and of growing up in his native Lacoan, in Glenfarne. Later, his stories included many of the people Dad met in his twenty six years of the working as "Social Worker" with "Leitrim County Council". His first story, "Drawing them home", included in the Leitrim Guardian was written in 1988 and he went on writing until his final story, "Tom Stokes, Traveller" in 2010.*

*This year as closing date for contributions was drawing nearer, I thought it a pity that so many of Dad's stories were largely undiscovered. I decided to enter this story, "The Mistress's Room", written six years ago. It's a wonderfully humorous account of events he remembered in his primary school classroom. I hope you will enjoy it!*

### THE MISTRESS'S ROOM

*Des Flynn*

LET THEM BE old or very old, I have yet to meet the man or woman who has no memory of the mistress's room at school. Pleasant memories mostly. The mistress taught infants, first and second classes and then let them loose into the long grass of the master's room where the running was cogglesome, a lot of uphill work, and a definite risk of explosions, (Right here, I am happy to

relate that the arrival of a new master to our school, just when I was about to switch rooms, took all the sting, all the horrors out of the "masters room" for me and my school generation. After, more or less successive "reigns of terror" a new atmosphere of kindness, enthusiasm, and civility prevailed. And, while we live, we will be grateful to Frank Carr for those happy years).

My mistress was a wholesome, kindly lady who was coming to the end of her teaching life when she took me in hand. I am proud to say that I must have been easily handled for that woman lived into her nineties. There was a homely atmosphere in her room because she loved children and was always into the encouragement game. One page read well or one sum solved and she gave you

a hearty shake-hands and said “Put it there if it was to be a ton weight.” She had sent her seven sons out into the world to fend for themselves and did her daily, mile-each-way, walk, to shed light on our darkened minds. When I say “walk” I have a vivid memory of her walking-style. She absolutely detested bee-lines—the shortest distance between two points and, therefore, with short and rapid steps zig-zagged her way along the road to Loughross school. After wrestling with ignorance all day, she zigzagged back to Lacon. Her mile was along our road home and we had ample opportunity to study her walking patterns. We who were close observers of Nature nicknamed this style “the snipe-trot” and, for the benefit of townies-illiterate in such matters, I will explain. When you disturb a snipe usually on swampy ground she rises and, in a hoo-haa-hoo-haa, right-left-right-left motion, darts off, avoiding the direct line, to bamboozle the scoundrel of a gun man who may be trying to get his sights fixed on her. I hasten to add that Mrs McHugh’s motions were entirely voluntarily in that there was no man with gun or rifle in hot pursuit along the Lacon line. Like most snipe, she arrived at her destination with unruffled feathers. The ruffling came when she got down to the one, two, threes and why did God make the world?

The big red door which admitted me on that first day was the door of the new school, built after the Economic War and before the outbreak of Word War II. The room had a high ceiling and was very bright. The desks, as you might expect, were comfortable

when you could confidently declare that three and two was five. But the same desks tormented you more than sitting on a pismire’s nest when you knew God made the world but couldn’t explain why he made it—it has just occurred to me that if you put the clock forward sixty years in Ireland you could have countless hordes sitting on the pismires.

I remember a very hearty fire-place—the turf must have been good that year—and a fire-guard, sturdy enough to withstand a stampede of elephants. On the table the curious looking words “An bórd” were written and didn’t I discover later that they meant “the table”—by the way, that’s just what Bórd meant for me and a whole generation but, in more recent times a new cohort—admittedly a tiny one, has savaged the word. Complete with “ipod”, laptop”, and “mobile” they don’t know what they want next and, like Siberian wolves, howl to the heavens that they are B O R E D .

Back to the classroom now. Between the door and window on the front wall I see something. A picture of a pretty looking girl looking up at an apple tree and it hanging down with red apples and, underneath, the words “cim, úbhla dearga” “I see red apples” If that was meant to teach me a morsel of gaelic didn’t it work well when I remember it after sixty six years! Maybe it was a cruel prank to drive us frantic with hunger, looking at the juicy red apples. Or, perhaps the artist was having a cheap-shot at the gentle sex and putting them in their place. He’s saying, “We know where all our troubles are rooted. Look at Eve in Eden! One thing sure. If this

idea had ever crossed the mind of our mistress she would have removed, not only the picture but the wall itself. Fancy, a school without a front wall as a monument to incipient Feminism.

War was about to break out in Europe and trouble was also about to break out in my room. Why? I ask myself, should teachers make the learning thing so complicated? Would you not expect that when a boy learns something and gets it planted firmly in his head that that should be enough? Oh, No, No, No. You must be able to get it down on your page in the jotter. I had learnt the shape of the figure 2 and had it firmly planted in my head. But, I was about to learn something about myself and my limitations—quick on the up-take, more than slow to get it down on paper. That was me. I scratched my head and chewed my pencil and, after several dry-runs, eventually came up with a shape which had some resemblance—a vague one, I admit, to the 2 in my head. I had the wiggle at the top properly executed and the very pronounced wiggle at the bottom but, instead of a curve connecting the two wiggles, I had a telegraph pole of a line going straight down—a good long one because I had loads of space in the jotter. The mistress was standing behind me. “Desmond Flynn” she called out—and you know, her shouts could be heard on Bilberry island below in Lough MacNein—“What IS THAT”? “Please Mam it’s a 2”. “A 2, A 2” Raising her voice even higher “come here and see this, Josephine Flynn. See what your brother thinks is a 2. Why, its more like the lifter on the crane crook for moving the kettle up or down over the fire!”

All this time, she was holding my poor jotter aloft for the whole classroom to laugh at it. And, laugh they did, the scoundrels!

I leave it to yourself to figure out how I felt. I had trouble with my 2's for years. And, believe me, I was fully grown and shaving before I could bring myself around to forgive the mistress.

There was an exercise for boys. It might have come under the heading of "Drama". It gave us a smattering of Gaelic but I suspect it was prompted by the fact that the mistress had two sons in the Irish army. We boys lined up, out in the cloakroom, imitation cardboard rifles over our left shoulder and, as we marched through the door into the room, each boy had to proclaim fearlessly and at the height of his voice, "Ni maith liom babógi, bhfearr liom gúna agus saighdiúirí" I don't like dolls, I prefer guns and soldiers.

The girls followed a different course. "Three little girls had to manoeuvre themselves in behind the legs of the blackboard-stand, get down on their hunkers, peeping out, while a bigger girl had to walk past, pause, and peep in at them. And all the girls in the room intoned the *psalm*:

*"Three mice went into a hole to spin.  
Puss passed by and puss looked in  
'what are you doing, my little men?'  
'We're weaving coats for gentlemen'  
Tra la la la, Tra la la la,  
Tra la la, Tra la la, Tra la la la"*

We boys, of course looked on in dumb disgust and allowed that, OK, it might be alright for girls but it really was a load of harmless nonsense. We knew that mice went into a hole to get to heck away from the cat, that they did no silly weaving after their narrow

escape, and never answered no questions from a bloodthirsty villain of a cat.

We did a lot of singing in Gaelic and English in that room but only two snatches remain in my mind. The first which, could have been—but probably wasn't—a bit of a brain-washing towards the advent of the Welfare State, went like this:

*"ag sinú lamh, ag sinú lamh, ag sinú lamh amach. Ag tarraint lamh, ag tarraint lamh, ag tarraint lamh isteach".* Stretching out your hands. Taking them back in. I think there was a hint in them words that somebody would make the stretch worth your while and that hands would come back in, loaded. At any rate there was a lilty little melody in the song to which you might dance "the Stacks of Barley" if the humour was in ya.

The second snatch of the song, also in Gaelic, was composed, I bet, in a part of the country where boys seldom, if ever, went to school. When one did venture out, it was the talk of the country! *"Ag dul ar scoil bhi Séamusín, bhi Séamisín, bhi Séamusín ag dul ar scoil bhi Séamusín, agus labharín búí ina phóca".* Wee James was going to school and a little yellow book in his pocket It seems that mother was out, then, asking everybody she met—Oh did you see my wee James, and the little yellow book in his pocket? And, of course, every woman for miles had seen James, book and all, O chonaic mé—Yes I saw your little James...and fairplay to him, but I saw the yellow book in his pocket too.

I had to sing the song with the rest of them but I can tell you my heart wasn't in it. Well Bad scrant to James and his yellow book, such a fuss! I had come to school with two turf under my oxter and "I wasn't asked where I goin" nor a "word about me!

My all-in wrestling match with the renegade of a 2 will convince you that the scars of shame are slow to heal. Let me tell you now that an experience of victory guarantees the same longevity: The mistress, for whatever reason, engineered a comparing match—a one-sided affair it was too—between one of the girls in my class and myself. It had to do with the catechism class only. In giving us our homework she made sure that this girl was one question ahead of me. I didn't like it. I set to work with some determination, I could say with bulldog pluck, and learned my own answer, the next one to it and three more in advance. Next day, of course, I was only examined on my allotted question and my enemy—that's the wrong word because this was a lovely girl and I had nothing against her—she was then examined on the next question and got lavish praise for her correct answer. Things rested so. Then one day the most unusual happened. This girl couldn't think of her answer. I shot up my hand "Please Mam" "Yes" the mistress said. It's my opinion that she thought I was about to say "bhfuil cead agam dul amach má sé do thoile" (May I go to the toilet ?) but, instead, I stood up, gave out the answer, word for word, down to the last full stop, and sat down. "Mortal sin is so called because it kills the soul, depriving it of its true life which is sanctifying grace, and because it brings everlasting death and damnation to the soul" Without compliment or praise the mistress enigmatically remarked "Now for ya", while I was saying to myself, "There is a God"

I took no pleasure at all in out-smarting that nice girl but I was glad to catch the mistress on the hop that fateful day, and I'd swear that as she shunted for Lagoon that evening, she left the snipe in the halfpenny place.