

Saints & Scholars, Heroes & Martyrs

Battie White

'DAD, WHAT DID ye do in the old days before there was television or computers?

I was often asked this by my children when they were younger. So, what did we do in the old days?

I was born and reared in Kinlough, Main Street, Kinlough, to be precise.

Kinlough, to any casual passerby, probably seemed a quiet backwater, where nothing much ever happened, same as hundreds of other little villages throughout Ireland. But they would be absolutely wrong.

We lived between Terry McGloin's pub and the Chapel, right next door to Vincent McGowan's barber shop and shaving salon. So as a small boy there wasn't much I didn't know about life, or so I thought. Saturday was always Vincent's busiest day. Men on their way to a night out in Bundoran would come in for the weekly shave, or maybe the very latest in men's hairstyles, the Crew Cut. Sometimes the shave might involve a small nick here and there. However, when the job was done, and Vincent pronounced the usual 'That's a lot better now,' we all agreed, and the satisfied customer departed for Bundoran, happy in the knowledge that he was looking his best, and this might just be his lucky night.

'Next customer please!'

There was a lot of downtime

in Vincent's job. When things were quiet we'd sit on the wall across the road, observing all the comings and goings on the Main Street, with much comment along the way. Men cycling past with the box of "messages" strapped on the carrier at the back, and maybe carrying a few drinks internally, would often be startled by Vincent's sudden command— 'Halt! Who goes there?'

Whitten's Dairy

Down the street was Whitten's dairy, which supplied fresh cool milk. From about the age of seven it was my job to go to Whitten's for the milk. The dairy behind the house, with its thick walls and small windows, was always cool, even on the hottest summer day.

Tommy Whitten would remove the muslin gauze covering the bucket of milk and carefully measure out the required amount into my can, pints and quarts as requested.

Tommy was an absolute gentleman, always service with a smile, and a friendly word to send you on your way.

Tommy was Church of Ireland, or what at that time was called Protestant. As a child at school we learned all about the lives of the Saints. To be a real Saint you really had to be a martyr, like St Stephen or St Maria Goretti. And that meant giving your life for your faith, if necessary. So, if someone, say for example a Protestant, tried to convert you to their religion, you had to resist all the way, even to martyrdom. You will be relieved to know, and so was I as a

seven year old, that Tommy never once tried to convert me.

My abiding memory of primary school is fights, most of which took place in the school yard, but sometimes in the classroom. Personally I didn't believe in getting involved in fights I couldn't win. There was one particular mass brawl after which a woman went to my father to lodge a complaint that I was fighting against her son Pat, who had obviously gone home the worse for wear.

'Did he actually hit your Pat?' my father asked.

'Well, not exactly, but he did take sides!'

The Fair Day

The Fair Day in Kinlough was the highlight of the month, with a free day off school. The town would be packed with cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, hens, cattle dealers, farmers and tinkers.

Men with wads of pound notes, fivers, tenners and bigger, drank whiskey and porter in the five pubs, women and children sipped sherry and lemonade. Three card trick men, street stalls, countless children and stray dogs. Sergeant McGinley and Guards Gallagher and McRory majestically patrolling the street to keep the peace. It would be a poor fair day if there wasn't at least one decent row in the street before nightfall.

Long before there were cattle marts there were cattle dealers. One such dealer, Francie Joe, would arrive in town in his immaculately turned out pony and trap, a big friendly man

with polished brown boots, a tweed jacket and a big wad of notes for the buying and selling.

The star attraction at the fair was Johnny Mulhern from Bundoran. His party piece was to “say” a shortened version of the Mass in Latin, complete with full Papal Blessing, and all for the price of one halfpenny. The longer version cost a full penny.

On fair days, Kinlough was indeed the Marrakech of the West.

Annual Mission

An even bigger event in the life of the village was the Annual Mission.

Days before the Mission, Miss O'Neill would set up her stall at the chapel gate, selling rosary beads, statues, scapulars and everything else you'd need to make you saintly. Once the mission started we were bombarded every evening with fiery sermons from missionaries, Passionists or Redemptorists, big men with big voices. In the days before PA systems these preachers could easily be heard at the back of the chapel, and indeed outside. Men who hadn't been to church since the previous Mission knelt on one knee in the chapel porch, and discussed the latest news.

The Redemptorist preacher paused in mid flight, adjusted his glasses, and pointed to the back of the chapel.

‘You men talking at the back of the church,’ he thundered, ‘do you realise you are on the very brink of Hell itself’.

A man turned to the lads around him, and in a loud whisper that all could hear, was

heard to say—‘Begod, Father, wasn't that a strange place to build a church.’

At about the age of fourteen, I graduated to working occasionally in Terry's pub. This really was an education in life and in philosophy. In the words of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, this was ‘where village statesmen talked with looks profound, and news much older than their ale went round’.

One night the talk in the pub turned, as it often did, to the Troubles, and the fight to get rid of the hated Black and Tans. Cliffoney is a village a few miles up the Sligo road, and was the location of an ambush on the Black and Tans a mere fifty years earlier. None of the men in the company had actually taken part in the ambush, but one man silenced the bar when he proudly announced— ‘I fed men that were at Cliffoney’. He didn't have to buy a round for the rest of the night. My own claim to fame is that I served drink to a man who fed men that were at Cliffoney.

Vincent the barber occasionally dropped in to the pub during the day when things in the barber shop were slack.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, there was only one other customer in the bar at the time, not much in the way of conversation, the only sound the ticking of the clock. ‘What time are the dancing girls on at?’ Vincent innocently asked.

Usually as soon as fellows reached the age of seventeen or eighteen they went off to England to work. The next year they'd be home on holidays, and within that short space of

time they had magically acquired what we thought was an English accent, wore snazzy suits and some of them even had transformed into Teddy Boys. They often hung around outside Sadie's shop down the town. Unsuspecting innocent “cubs” would be told to go into the shop to ask how much was a thrupenny bar of chocolate, or a sixpenny ice cream, only to be ejected shortly afterwards for being so cheeky!

As children there was always plenty to do, the days weren't half long enough. Robbing apples, catching bees (don't ask!), Cowboys and Indians, marbles, skittles, it was non stop action.

If the day was too warm for exertions, we would sit on the wall down the town, and watch the cars and lorries drive over the potatoes we had carefully placed on the road. The first person to have ten potatoes squashed was the winner. Again, don't ask where the potatoes came from!

The monthly court session in the courthouse down the town was big excitement, especially if it was a bright sunny day. We could sit on the wall with mirrors in hand, and reflect the sun through the window, right into the judge's eyes. Blind justice indeed!

You had to stay alert and run when you saw the door opening and the guard coming out to investigate.

So, there was always something to do growing up in Kinlough, we were never ‘bored’.

Some names and incidents have been withheld, to protect the guilty.