

FROM LEITRIM TO LIMERICK

Fr Anthony (Henry) Keane OSB

SOME YEARS AGO I lost my grip and slipped a hundred miles downstream. From Leitrim to Limerick is all downhill, but in this strange land down here there are still some things familiar. Gravity is a reassuring constant friend, and there is the presence of the Shannon, sweet and lifegiving.

In these wooded hills of East Limerick, I had almost forgotten the magic violet and primrose filled ditches and dykes of home until I met at Glenstal Abbey the *Leitrim Guardian* angel, Father Gerry Comiskey PP, who demanded to know what I was doing here and to give an account of myself in writing. Have I kept the faith or become a pagan? Do I remember anything?

How could one ever forget the magic and dread of the old Gaol and the four poles where we slipped into the dark waters of the Shannon and came back; the fair days when civilisation seemed buried in primal Urstoff, and the strong men from the fields took over the town and dealt powerful hands of forty pounds or more with five pounds back as if a penny. Later in the



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day the rain stopped and the declining sun reassured us of its presence and the fire brigade with powerful jets of water white and brown laden floods made all clean and plain again.

We lived on Gallows Hill— Summerhill some called it. But the old roots of the great ash tree that served to hold the martyrs of Liberty, that stood on the brow of the hill, silhouetted against the sky to strike terror in the street below, were still there until 1953 when they were removed with axe and crowbar in favour of the front garden walls of the six new houses. Beside us were the enormous and very dangerous old waterworks that predated the water tower. The original system comprised deep concrete tanks

half buried in bog mould, brought, perhaps by donkey and car from the bog below, to provide some containing counter pressure for the cisterns. One fine year, by a spark that came from heaven or earth, this peat ignited and smouldered away providing pillars of fire by night and clouds of smoke by day and great entertainment.

Pyrotechnical research was supplemented by elemental Potassium which .could be gathered from the ground of the Market Yard (Flynn's). Dropped into a lidded container with H₂O, the Hydrogen was released and fired, providing a satisfactory retort to the foolery on Bikini Atoll at the time. War was rarely far from Gallows Hill. Our

weapons, designed purely for defensive purposes included arrows tipped with coiled wire which neatly sliced one defender's eyebrow without touching the eye.

My uncle Dermot Doorly tells me that in the early 1940s, while the battle of Kursk raged, there was a massing of the FCA on the Hill, in one of the great manoeuvres of the Emergency. The enemy, (the Germans) were advancing North from Longford. Mudda Magee was given the binoculars and sent to his station atop the water tower to keep watch, which he faithfully did. However, the day turned out a bit damp and the Germans rang through to the Post Office to say that they were postponing the assault. The defenders then took up positions in various houses in Main Street and Bridge Street. Late that night, returning to quarters in the dark, the Coriolis and Aghameeny contingents, as they passed the County Home, heard a voice from out of the darkness and mists at a great height—it was Mudda, faithful and forgotten, Lads, is there any sign of the Germans?

Another adventurous structure with its flanged concrete beams ('Moss Beams') was Hartley Bridge. The carriage way leaves Roscommon in perfect trajectory, like Evel Knievel, but its landing in Leitrim is a little bumpy, if it lands at all, for it ends two feet

above the earth, the gap being filled with mud and rock. Michael Mulleary used to storm over into Roscommon at this point with horse and car and the furious cry: You got it wrong, O'Neill Clarke, you got it wrong.

The built heritage includes the magnificent bridge, harbour and quays, all made with great blocks of limestone and still serving for access to and crossing of river. The river is at its most beautiful at three o'clock in the morning with the birds beginning to wake up and the coots only gently protesting about the silently gliding row boat as it slips past them.

While we sang, on occasions, a dreadful hymn to Saint Patrick—'Se do chloigh na draoithe', gentleness and love inspired most of our beliefs. We festooned the streets with flowers and branches for the Corpus Christi procession, and read with devotion the tales saint Colmcille and other Irish saints with their love and care for all of creation. I remember, while serving Mass, seeing in clear daguerreotype the outline of a thrush, who had nested outside the sanctuary stained glass window and inside the protective mesh, caught in the light of the rising sun as she fed her eager young. I felt my 'distraction' came with a blessing and approval from my teachers and from Him who likened his love to that of a mother hen.

As 'fundamentalism' in different guises of triviality always attends our regressive pleasure, it is refreshing to recall what seems to have happened when the Christian missionaries first came to Ireland preaching Christ: the Irish replied: Sure Christ, we know Him well. Is He not the singing of the bird in the tree, Is He not the power of the wind and the waves, Is He not the strength of the oak, the King of nature and Lord of all (Ri na nDul, Ri na n-Uile) the love in Maidens' eyes, the music of what happens. How wonderful to know that He has come on earth and walked among us. He has given His life for us; let us give our lives for Him. And they raised their sails and let them be filled with His Holy Spirit to go where that Spirit might list.

Arrived in France they were well received. They directed their steps however, not to the Gallo-Roman Christian cities so much as to the dangerous migrant encampments of Barbarians where the local Christians dared not tread. But the Irish knew that wherever they went, Christ would be there before them, present in the hearts of those who spoke with them. For Christ is the composer of the symphony of all that happens. He is the Ever New Tongue (*An Teanga Bith Nua*), ever the Creator. And whether our path leads to life or death, what matters is that it be part of His harmony.