KILLAVOGGY SCHOOL

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It stood on a hill above my Uncle Bernie's. A stolid building, it dominated the lovely Leitrim vista that it overlooked. Within its walls, everything that shaped our lives was carefully nurtured by strict but kind teachers.

In my time, those teachers were Mrs Margaret Fallon, wife of the local Councillor, and Sean White (RIP), my own father. Years before that, the Juniors' teacher was the adored Maimee Hanley, sadly also RIP. She is still spoken of with great respect and affection by those who considered themselves privileged to have been taught by her. I had an even greater privilege. She was mother to myself and nine siblings.

Mt earliest memory of school was the needlework class. My introduction to the intricacies of knit one, purl one was painful. I dropped more stitches than I knitted. I was sitting on the hob of the big open fire.

My hands grew clammier and clammier from the heat of the fire and my frustration. Eventually, the yarn got so tangled that temper overcame me. I desperately tried to unravel it by tearing it with my teeth.

Total silence. I looked up. There was a circle of faces staring at me, suppressed laughter ready to crack their faces. The same I felt! And the kindness of Mrs Fallon who patiently unravelled for me and showed me how to start again. Today I could knit an Aran sweater–and have done–while watching TV.

And the religious exam. Not alone did we know the 10 Commandments backwards, I liked to think that they formed the foundation of which we built our code of life, irrespective of religion.

Bible history was favourite. I loved the story of Lot's wife, and how Sampson toppled the Temple, and how David killed Goliath. The religious examiner came once a year. He gave certificates of merit to the best in each class. My brother, Sean (RIP), usually came first.

In winter, the huge classroom was lit by a proportionately huge fire. The Master let us sit or stand around it in circles when we were doing oral work. For sums and writing we had, naturally, to sit at our desks. Sums were and still are alien territory to me. Problem solving invariably had commercial travellers selling X numbers of Y product at Z pounds, shillings and pence. Not only this, but it was further complicated by including ha'pennies, farthings and multiples of same.

My downfall was compounded by the fact that I would steal the keys of the school off the hook where father kept them. Then I'd sneak into the room, get the answer book and copy the answers into my exercise book. All went fine until Father got suspicious at my never getting my sums wrong. He asked to see my work and the game was up. I have struggled ever since with mathematics.

Summer was magic. On May Eve, we were allowed out to gather Mayflowers on Kelly's hill. We spread them on the ground of all doors at school and home to make a mat for Our Lady to walk on and enter our homes with a blessing. We were also allowed to go bare-footed, and the weather, I remember, was always favourable. During this time, the window sills were adorned with jam jars of fresh, wild flowers.

Many a time I escaped the dreaded commercial travellers by protracting changing the water until the sum time was over. Another clever dodge I used was to pare the pencils while the others were toiling on the hated Tuiseal Guinideach. There was a rotary pencil sharpener on the mantelpiece. I'd wantonly pare unnecessary swipes off perfectly good pencils, while the class struggled with 'hatai na fir' etc. When Dusky Dan's travelling show came to the Master's hall, he let us all go. The show transported us to heightened realms of unexperienced delights. We drank in every word, and until the next show came round, we endlessly re-enacted all that the previous show had contained–jokes, songs and the Question Time.