

Looking back

reading between the lines

BRENDAN DRUMM



Brendan Drumm, professor of Paediatrics at University College Dublin and former CEO of the HSE grew up in Manorhamilton. He discovered a large collection of letters mainly dating from the early 1900s in his father's family house in Mullies. Drawing information from these letters he creates a picture of what life was like for people in Leitrim between 1910 and 1940.

Economic Circumstances

In the early 1900s the people were largely still tenant farmers in that they were responsible for making land annuity payments each six months. The correspondence from that time includes regular demands from the land annuities office (prior to Irish independence) for payment of two pounds relating to the Drumm farm at Lisnabrack, then around 16 acres. The challenge of making these payments was obviously huge. There are also documents outlining legal action being initiated by the Harbison estate (of which I was not aware) against my grandmother and it appeared also against others in the locality for over-use of the turberry rights. It is difficult to conceive that less than 100 years ago people were struggling to pay annuities to retain the land on which they were almost totally dependent for food and could only cut turf within a fixed quota. At that time turf was their only significant source of fuel for heat and for cooking.

Employment & Emigration

By 1925 my father who was then 14 years old had secured employment in the creamery at Lurganboy, which later was moved to Manorhamilton. However, he was the only one among a family of seven who appears to have obtained paid employment. His brother Dennis did serve his time in the public house trade in Manorhamilton.

The correspondence shows that the creamery had to lay off workers and put others on short time because of the effects of economic war on the price of Irish dairy exports in the 1930s.

Emigration is of course the reason why most of these letters were written. The letters from the emigrants confirm what accomplished writers people generally were at that time. Letters from my Aunt Kate in New York, and my uncles Dennis and Owen in London, paint a vivid picture of what life was like for them in their new surroundings.

In New York in the 1930s life was clearly difficult with employment hard to obtain. Kate describes homesickness and also some envy of how well others who had emigrated earlier from Mullies had done as she struggled to establish herself in a new world. The level of emigration is obvious from the descriptions from New York and London of how they regularly met up with many neighbours from home and descriptions of how specific people from home were doing in their new country.

London in the 1930s appears that have been better for the new arrivals than New York. Dennis writes of his amazement at being in a job as a barman where he is both paid and has time off to do as he wishes. This indicates how his previous work in Manorhamilton, serving his time, was unpaid (except for his keep) and involved being available all day every day of the week. One has to be somewhat careful in judging differences between New York and London as being real rather than perhaps reflecting the personalities of the individual letter writers. It appears from Kate's correspondence in general that she was prone to complain, whereas Dennis was a very happy type of

person. This in itself can inform us of the dangers of writing history based on written accounts without having any knowledge of the writers disposition.

The differences between life in Ireland and in London on a social level are very well described by Dennis in responding to my father's request that he try to arrange for Denis' twin sister Ellen to join him in London. Dennis at first suggests that Ellen would be lost because of the sophistication of women in London. My father's response was that he had seen many others "less smart" than Ellen who, after a period in England, had returned on holidays as very sophisticated women. Dennis responds by saying that my father needs to understand the difference between Ireland and London and to know what underlies women becoming so much more sophisticated after a period of time in London. He blandly states that it is estimated that two thirds of Irish girls arriving in London "lose their religion" and this is also his own experience from observing them. It is for the reader of the letter to interpret the message.

Communications

Letter writing was the major form of communication. In today's world of e-mail this would be considered to be very slow. However, this system was much faster than we might expect, in that there were three post deliveries each day in Sligo. Letters from a company in Sligo to my father seeking remittance on a regular account demand that such remittance arrive by the second post on Thursday at the latest and that the last post on Thursday or the first post on Friday was not acceptable. The postal system was so efficient that people in London wrote requesting that turkeys be posted to them for Christmas.

The dependency on, and efficiency of, the postal system is more starkly indicated by the oldest letter written in the late 1800s from my granduncle Michael to my grandfather John. Michael had achieved a high position among the police force in what was

then referred to as The Strait Settlements, now known to us as Malaysia and Singapore. In the correspondence Michael complains to John about the fact that it took almost 6 weeks for his last letter from Lisnabrack to arrive in The Strait settlements and expresses his frustration at this unacceptable delay.

Radio was not available to most in the 1930s. The correspondence reveals that the Gilmurrays in Manorhamilton together with my father became involved in a grand plan to get my uncle Denis in London to source a radio there and to post the radio to them. They were concerned about the cost of excise duty and suggested that Dennis would post the radio to an address in Belcoo to avoid this cost. They were very excited about the prospect of getting a radio but were also concerned that it might not work.

Telegrams were very effective for urgent communication across great distances. My father, after a few years of planning, finally made it to London to visit Dennis in 1936. Within two days of his arrival a telegram was delivered to Dennis' place of work as a barman in Junction Road North London requesting my father to return immediately because of an outbreak of flu affecting the staff at the creamery, including the manager, in Manorhamilton. You can imagine his disappointment having got to London for the first time, probably one of the few times he had ever been beyond Sligo. Again, it demonstrates the efficiency of the communication.

In the early 1940s there was comprehensive correspondence in relation to trying to establish a cinema in Manorhamilton. The best available equipment is described in correspondence from Dublin as being German-made and the vendors warn that while it is the best equipment it will be quite impossible to obtain spare parts because of the war. The other problem was the size of the proposed hall as the big movie producers MGM and Warner were interested only in profit-sharing and will only supply new movies to venues large enough to generate

significant profits. It is difficult to comprehend that attempts to introduce films to Manorhamilton were affected by the corporate interests of Hollywood moviemakers.

Social Life

Social life was remarkably active. Concerts and Dances were organized regularly (at least every few months) at Mullies Hall. The night of 25 December was a particularly big dance. Posters advertising the dance in 1941 were supplied by R A Cooney. Printers in Manorhamilton who provided what is referred to on their letterhead as a prompt poster Service. In 1941, the posters cost 20 shillings and decorations for the Hall cost 21 shillings. For the same Christmas night dance John Egan and son of Sligo supplied six dozen lemonade, six dozen orange crush, three dozen lemon soda, and three dozen grapefruit. The cost of this order was two pounds and nine shillings. However the 18 dozen bottles were charged out to the committee at £4.10 shillings with a demand for a return of these bottles within a tight timeframe. This indicates one of the major changes from then to our modern society wherein at that time the containers were much more valuable than the contents as against practically all containers and packaging being now throwaway. The dances do not appear to have been entirely alcohol free in that for the same 1941 dance there is an invoice from Joseph Keany, wholesale and family grocer in Manorhamilton for a total of £1.11 shillings and 10 pence for the supply of two dozen stout, one dozen beer and four baby powers.

Detailed accounts were kept in relation to the dances and concerts. In 1934 there is a detailed accounting of all expenditure varying from payments to Joe Rooney and separately JD Rooney for groceries, payments to the musicians of seven shillings, purchasers of oil, candles and flints and there is even an accounting for two shillings to pay for fiddle repairs, presumably relating to a fiddle breaking on the night of the concert. The takings of that night

in 1934 amounted to four pound and eight shillings and the balance remaining after the costs were taken into account was one pound five shillings and four pence. There is a note from my father on the balance being paid to Father Brady on 24 June 1934. Fr Brady must have been parish priest for a long period as there is documentation in 1947 outlining similar payments to him but profit had improved at that stage, one of these payments being for three pounds five shillings and six pence.

A lot of effort seems to have gone into drafting the advertising posters for such events. A draft notice is available declaring that, "a raffle and dramatic entertainment will be held at Lisnabrack house on Sunday night the 16th inst. **DON'T MISS** this event as Mr Paddy Kerrigan, proprietor, will be personally in attendance. Special music has been engaged for the occasion. Jim Gurneen the acting MC will extend a hearty welcome to the ladies." Interestingly admission for gentlemen was six pence but for ladies only three pence. This notice is signed by Tom Allen. The notice was apparently submitted for printing to Sligo stationary Depot at seven and eight market Street.

Again, as in the present era, all does not appear to have been calm and peaceful at these events. There is a note from an individual apologising for his behaviour dated 8 November 1936. It states " I am very sorry for causing any annoyance or using any expression which caused any annoyance to any member of the committee in charge in Mullies Hall on Sunday night 6th inst and I trust this will be accepted as an apology." Clearly it was important not to be barred from future events in the hall.

The GAA was central to the social lives of most young men at that time. The following letter from my father to the GAA again indicates how little may have changed in many respects in terms of our behaviour over the years. The letter was headed Killasnett' GAA club' and dated 17th of May 1939. It states: "A cara, I have been instructed by the committee of the above club to

lodge with you an objection against Dromahair football team being awarded the points in the game played at Dromahair in the intermediate league on Sunday, 14 May 1939 on the following grounds — that Frank McGreal who played for Dromahair was illegal as he played with Ballinaglera against Blacklion in the Dundon cup competition of this year at Blacklion on Sunday the 23rd April; in contravention to rule 8A observation (7) page 35 of official guide, and also not in accordance with by-law drafted up by the North Leitrim board. I enclose you herewith £1 (one pound) in accordance with rule 1 page 123 of official guide. Mise le meas, Sean O Droma.”

It is interesting my father signs off in Irish as this is a form of his name that he would not normally have used. It must have been required that for correspondence with the GAA you used the Irish form of your name.

The love lives of young men and women in the 1920s and 30s were also far more active than we might at this stage think. We think of people being very conservative but the love letters clearly describe girlfriends being very angry over their boyfriend wandering with other ladies. It is clear that a woman's bicycle being spotted outside a man's house and this being reported to his girlfriend, caused significant disharmony. Passionate language is used by women in their correspondence in relation to their love lives.

Death

Dealing with death was not only sad but a very costly issue in the 1920s and 1930s. An account from Fox's grocery shop on Castle Street details to supply of a coffin and habit. This I presume was from my grandfather but could have been for my uncle Owens' wife who died following childbirth around the same time. They had married in their late teens. I can remember my father often telling us how in the 1930s people were so impoverished that they struggled to pay to bury their dead with dignity. In addition to the coffin and habit this account

notes the supply of a small amount of tea, bread and sugar for the funeral. A separate account notes the hire of a car from Skeffington's to take people or presumably the Coffin to the cemetery.

Social Activism

Despite their own poverty there is remarkable evidence of people's commitment to helping others who they considered to be even less fortunate in other parts of the world. There are letters from the Holy Ghost priests at St Mary's College in Dublin (where ironically my own three sons ended up at school) acknowledging receipt from my father of sums of a few pounds on various occasions in the late 1920s. This money was to support their missionary work. He must have collected this money among local people at a time when he was only 18 years old. It is difficult to comprehend the generosity this represents from people in Mullies who themselves were unable to support their own families, the majority of whom had to emigrate.

Education

Certainly in the Drumm household education was highly valued and the passage of books from one individual to another suggests that this was the case in many families. There are numerous items of correspondence from a Correspondence School in Sheffield called Bennett College. This outlines materials to be read and examinations to be completed and returned to the college. At various times there are also requests for payments for courses from Bennett College. The correspondence is remarkable in the way it attempts to encourage the student to continue with their hard work. There is other correspondence to institutions elsewhere in Ireland from my father investigating the possibility that they might allow him to do further studies with them. Books were also very highly valued. My father and a number of others attended night classes in the 1920s with Master McGrath in Manorhamilton. The passing of books from one individual at the classes to

another is confirmed by each owner carefully signing their name at the front of the book. Books were extremely expensive and handled very carefully.

Conclusion

Being based on a collection of letters which were not saved in any regular or formal way this report is disjointed. There will be many still living in the community who will have memories going back a long way who may wonder why any of the details outlined above would be considered of interest to people today. However I felt that for young people in the community the information would demonstrate how people in Mullies were at that time extremely poor but were also an extremely proud people, who communicated with one another in a far more comprehensive way than we do today, and who had very active social lives despite the lack of money. Their commitment to community activities is very notable and the dependence on community is probably consistent with what still happens today in parts of the world where people are relatively impoverished.

Finally is important to try and put the passage of time in context. Many, especially the young, would consider the building of Mullies Church in 1910 to be a time very far back in history. However, consider the fact that my father John died in 2004, having been born in Mullies in 1910 and his father who lived until the 1930s was born in 1846 the time of the great famine. When you reflect on the fact that the period between the great famine and 2004 in Mullies could be bridged by two lives (which overlapped by 24 years) you get a sense as to how close to all of these events we are and an appreciation of how rapidly and dramatically changes in Ireland have occurred.

A version of this article was published previously in a local booklet: *Mullies — A History* commemorating the centenary of Mullies church