

NORA'S STORY *Mick Geelan*

This is an interview I did with my aunt Nora Beirne (nee Logan) who, although born in Drumsna, lived most of her life in Mohill. She was a woman of extraordinary recall, not just about her own times but also of the stories she got from her mother. She retired to Dublin in 1978. I talked to her at her daughter Dympna's house in Rathfarnham in 2009. She was then eighty nine years of age. She passed away in 2011 aged ninety one

MY MOTHER'S grandfather was John Beirne. He had a tavern in Drumsna. I don't know exactly what a tavern was in those days but I believe they sold drink and food, and I think they kept people as well. They had some kind of a shop also. John would have been fairly comfortably off for the times and when his son; my grandfather; ran off and joined up for the Boer War they were very annoyed. They followed him as far as Mullingar but they didn't get him back. He enlisted in his mothers name as Patrick McWeeney. He was only sixteen at the time. He was one of the lucky ones; he got to be a batman for an officer. He used to say that he served "on the burning plains of Egypt", and also in Abyssinia. When he came back from the war he married a girl called Bridged Shannon from near Elphin and they started a little eating house in Drumsna, where people who would be going the road would stop for a cup of tea or maybe a sandwich.

They kept boarders too. Sir Gilbert King and Rowleys had the two big houses in Drumsna at that time and different tradesmen used come and work for them from time to time. They would send their tradesmen to stay with my grandfather; probably because he had been in the war. When jobbers would come to a fair, they would often come the night before and stay there too. That time people used to walk cattle very long distances from a fair and I suppose

that would be easier if you were there from the night before. My grandmother's two brothers Tom and Denny Shannon had a butchers shop in Drumsna at that time too, and they were cattle jobbers as well. When they died there was no butcher shop in Drumsna.

There were four in my mother's family. She had two brothers called John and Tom, and a sister called Nora. Tom was her twin although he was over six foot and she was tiny. Her father died young and her brothers and sister went to America so she stayed home to mind her mother. Nora was a housekeeper in a hotel and when she came home on holidays one time she met a pig dealer from Ballymahon. They got married and she never went back. The two boys stayed over there and I don't believe they ever came home.

My mother ran the place on her own after her mother died, but it was hard to make a living. She still kept boarders and did teas and dinners and she had a small shop where she sold herrings on a Friday and that sort of thing. A jobber from Eslin called Higgins came to stay with her one time, and he told her that he knew of a lad from Ballinamore who was looking to get married. He told her that this man was a butcher, came from a good family, but there were seven brothers in it and he had no place of his own. She said "Bring him down and talk to me" and the upshot was;

the match was settled over a bottle of whiskey. They started a butcher shop in the house and built a slaughterhouse out in the back garden. At that time butchers used go around to the fairs and set up a stall there. When you sold your load you would buy a beast and bring it home for the shop, or for the next fair. It was a hard way to make a living, and dangerous too because you were carrying a lot of money.

They had four children born in Drumsna. Mona was the eldest and then Nancy, Paddy and me in that order. The night I was born in 1920, Pat Gill was shot by the Black and Tans going down the street in Drumsna. He was on the run at the time and he came home for an uncle's wake. He was walking down the street in between his two sisters, and they had him dressed up as a woman too but the Tans were looking out for him and they pulled him out and shot him.

Mona died from meningitis when she was around six. They were in a bad way for a long time after that. They decided to sell the place in Drumsna and move to Mohill to make a new start. As far as I know the people who bought the place in Drumsna were called Lynch. A man called Kerins from Rinn owned a butcher's shop in Mohill, and he was selling out. My mother and father went down and bought it with the money from the Drumsna house. They gave eight hundred pounds for it.

The house was built in 1824 and there was always work to be done on it. I think the electricity was in the house when we came to it. I don't ever remember it being put in anyway. My mother was afraid of her life of it. She only ever had a lamp in Drumsna. The electricity was owned by a German man called Mr. Cope. He had a big generator in a shed up the green lane and he lived in Kelly's Hotel. We would be sent up to pay the bill every month and he would often give us half a crown. He was a very nice old man.

Our house had no back garden, but the graveyard at the protestant church ran along the back of it. We used climb out the back window and play hide and seek among the headstones. If we were caught my mother would kill us but she used to be busy in the shop. We went to school up in the convent; where it is now. I remember Sr Gonzaga and Mother Bertmans and Sr Michael. I remember I blotted my copybook once and I told Sr Gonzaga the pen furled. She often laughed at that after. We used be sent up to the chapel to the rosary in winter time. That time you could buy a half pound of prunes in Bradshaws for a couple of pence. We would sit up in the gallery and throw the pips down at people we knew. You had to watch out for the nuns though, because if you got caught you would get the strap. When you bought a place at that time, there was ground rent to be paid on it. Georgie Johnson lived in the Castle in Mohill and he collected the ground rent for Sir Morgan Crofton. He was a small sized man with a big white beard. He owned lots of big cattle and

plenty of land. There were two sisters living with him in the castle, Miss Annie and Mrs Bodwin. They had a talking parrot and when we would deliver the meat to the castle they would let us in to see the parrot. When the lease expired on the shop they put up the rent. When Georgie Johnson came to collect it; my mother tore strips off him. I remember, at the time, I thought it was an awful thing to be talking like that to a big shot.

In later years there was a campaign to buy out the ground rent. John McCartin and Tommy Casey were on the committee and I think Cannon Masterson was at the head of it. There were orders given to everyone in the town not to pay the rent. I know that John McCartin and Tommy Casey got notices that they were to be arrested. There were probably a few more too, but I don't remember. On the day it was supposed to happen there was a crowd gathered waiting for the police but nothing happened. They found out after, that Crofton had the whole town mortgaged to a big Jewish money lender in Cavan. There was a big meeting held in Athlone and the whole committee went to it and it got settled after that. When Georgie Johnson died Mary McWeeney bought the castle and turned it into a guesthouse. I think Tommy Casey's family live there now and the HSE have an old people's home at the front of it.

The hardest job we had to do when we were young was carrying water. Between the house, the shop and the slaughterhouse, there was an awful lot of washing to be done. All that water had to be carried in buckets from the river.

The drinking water for the house, and later on for the dining room, was got from a pump down at the bottom of the town at Dr Dorr's. My father had a special cart made up with low wheels and a timber circle in the middle to hold a big wooden barrel. We would tackle the pony and take him down to the pump and fill the barrel. I remember well when the piped water came to the town. The Priors from Ballinamore got the job of putting it in, but they gave a lot of work to the locals. The whole town had to be dug up and it took a long time to get it finished.

When I was sixteen I was sent to serve my time in Cullen's of Grafton Street We sold flowers and sweets and all that kind of thing. It was a very up market kind of shop and it was very dear. They had another shop in O Connell Street and it was cheaper. At that time you had to pay to serve your time and I was given seven shillings a week pocket money. Even back in the thirties seven shillings wouldn't get you very far. They had a big house up in the Phoenix Park and I stayed there. Belgrave House it was called.

Padraic Pearce's two sisters were customers in the shop; Senator, Miss Margret Pearce and her sister Bridget. They didn't get on very well and they lived in two separate houses. Margaret was a republican and Bridget thought that two brothers were too big of a price to pay for any republic. I saw Douglas Hyde being made President of the Constitution of Ireland at the GPO. He was a stiff old man at the time. He had an aunt married in Mohill, and his people used to live there at one

time. I wanted to go up to him and tell him who I was, but I was afraid to. I often regretted that because he would talk to anybody. He was that kind of man. Jones in Drumard, sent him an invitation to shoot on his estate, but he didn't go.

I came back to Mohill in 1937. There was a big Blueshirt rally in the town shortly after and my uncle John came down from Ballinamore a few days before and said "All those people are going to have to be fed". John always had a great business head on him. Cosgrove, the minister was coming down and there was going to be a great crowd. My mother was feeding people all her

life anyway, so we set up a dining room at home. We borrowed tables and chairs from everybody we knew and set them up in the gateway at the side of the house. We fed all the people there and we brought the guards in the front door and fed them upstairs in the sitting room. You couldn't mix the two. That was the start of the dining room and we ran it for years after that.

The night before the rally there was war in the town. The IRA burned down the platform that the Blueshirts had set up for their speakers. They were all arrested and they were held up in the barracks. The women were going up all night with gallons of tea

and sandwiches for them. The platform was built again and when Cosgrove came they carried him down the street on their shoulders. There was a man used to come into the shop one time had a rhyme about the Blueshirts,

Have you heard about the Blueshirts that's formed up of late, They're headed by the general that's out to ruin the state.

And the last line went

When Duffy wore the Blueshirt, the fleas I'm told they flew. They'd rather perish on the ground, than die in Duffy's blue.

SNIPPET

FIVE OF Carrigallen's most eminent citizens took part in a dramatic Shave-in at the Kilbrackan Arms Hotel in Carrigallen. Shaved and shorn for Charity, the participants collected over €8000. The charity concerned was *Men Only for Prostate Cancer*. Those who sold their beards were: Tom Humphreys, Mervyn Richardson and his son Keith, Eamon O'Malley & Christy Coyne.

SHAVE-IN AT THE KILBRACKAN ARMS!

16 November 2014



Tom before and after!



Mervyn



Eamonn



Keith



Christy



PHOTOS BY TONY FAHY