REMEMBERING NOEL

(Noel Flynn, 19 December 1944–24 January 2007)

Mairéad Flynn

"...Modesty, humility, generosity and kindness were his great virtues..."

ONE MONTH premature, and weighing just five pounds, George Noel Flynn arrived in this world on the nineteenth day of December 1944. Like most other babies born in rural Ireland at that time, he was delivered at home, in the larger of two bedrooms over our father's shop, in Kiltyhugh, two miles from Ballinamore. He was considered delicate, as he was jaundiced and cried a lot and so it was decided that our mother's youngest sister, Nonie, a nurse and midwife, should take care of him for three months, in her home near Garadice.

Noel thrived and by all accounts returned to Kiltyhugh as a bonny baby, who even sported a slight tan. Nonie certainly knew the benefits of vitamin D long before the notion became popular. Our childhood passed without incident. We were raised in the same manner as nearly every other child in the parish. There were no treats, no trips or excursions, few new clothes, no birthday gifts and only one gift apiece from Santa Claus. What we did not have, we did not miss. We worked on the land, and around the house. In those days, children were meant to be useful.

There was, however, much love in our family. Our parents talked to us a lot, played games with us, taught us how to play cards, and passed on family and local history, as well as folklore and customs. This happened only when there were no outsiders present, for, when there were, we became invisible, just like all children of that time.

Noel and I regularly visited neighbours' houses, played with their children, and even visited the houses of older adults who had no children. We loved that, especially the latter, and would spend hours on these excursions eagerly absorbing all the tales, tall or otherwise! Noel went alone on these outings more often than I. Once he was lost for hours, and we panicked as we scoured the countryside for him. There was always the fear and terror of a child slipping into a well or bog hole, for it sometimes happened to calves, which perished in that manner. Noel was eventually found happily chatting away to Patrick Galligan, in his home in Drumgowna. These trips afield must have begun when he was only four: unthinkable in today's society.

As a toddler, Noel used to talk to the chickens and ducks in the farmyard. One day he ran into the house crying: he had been attacked by the rooster! 'Go on out of that, it was only a rooster, you won't die, Noel', said my mother. 'Ah, but he had a stone in his hand', he sobbed. We used to bring the cows home at milking time, every evening. There was much discussion about those animals, and we had a name for each one of them. The horse and ass had also been christened.

School

Not surprisingly, school dominated our young lives, and our time at Clogher National School was very happy. There were so many routes which we could take to school, including the Mullinabrehan Road, the Kiltyhugh/Curraghnawall Road and the Drumgowna Road. We learned so much in that two-roomed schoolhouse. It did, however, have the disadvantage that our mother was the teacher. We were not allowed to speak privately to her while in school. Worse still, if we got into trouble there, we were punished again for our mischief when we got home. Noel was particularly unfortunate in this respect as he was a fun-loving practical joker, and he and Micheal Brady were partners in crime. How many times did I hear my mother pray: 'God help me to get those two out of here; I'll have a bit of peace and ease then'.

When he was twelve, Noel was sent to secondary school in Gormanstown, Co.Meath. Each time he left home for school he was very homesick. Gormanstown was a long way from Leitrim in those days, and he never had any visitors as we did not have a car. However, mother and I did make the journey twice for the school's Christmas concert. In 1957, they staged 'The Gipsy Baron', by Johann Strauss. Members of the Radio Eireann orchestra played the accompaniment, and it was a great thrill for my mother and me to see Noel on stage, dressed as a very pretty girl! I did feel a little ashamed as we walked up the long driveway to the school, for we were the only family members attending the performance who did not drive there. The next year it was 'De Fledermaus', and Noel taught me all the songs and choruses, in Irish.

Both operettas had been translated from German into Irish by one of the Franciscan fathers.

Sport

From when he was very young, Noel loved football; he joined the Ballinamore schoolboys' team when he was nine or ten. Tom Gannon trained the team, and Noel cycled into the park to practise several times a week. Later on, Christy Gallogly took over as coach. I had the job of washing the gear. There were many times when Noel would turn up for a game and not be selected. I often wondered about that, as I knew that he was a fine player. Eventually, I became sufficiently irked as to ask Christy for an explanation, for it always bothered me to see the disappointment on Noel's face when he returned home after having been omitted from the team. 'Ah well, now, Mairéad, you do have a point. But you want to know the truth? Noel is the only lad I can leave off who won't go home in a huff or complain either. Then he always comes back', was Christy's response. Not much satisfaction for me, but it spoke volumes about Noel's nature.

At secondary school, he also played tennis, and was a member of the Leinster schoolboy's table tennis team. He continued to play Gaelic football and went on to win nine Senior County Championship medals, seven with Ballinamore and two with Aughawillan. But he was also an excellent soccer player—and despite the ban on 'foreign games' was a member of the bank soccer team.

Music

When we were children, music was our favourite recreational activity. Both our parents were musical; our father sang to us every night at bedtime, whilst our mother taught us new songs, including many in Irish, at least once or twice a week. By the age of seven Noel could play many tunes on the tin whistle; he later graduated to recorder. He took piano lessons and taught himself guitar. The chording in the Beatles' music fascinated him, and he could play all of their compositions. During the 1950s and 1960s we never missed the Top Twenty on Radio Luxemburg. Noel used to write to me every week with the current list of hits, as he had more access to radio in Gormanstown than I did, in Cavan. As adults, we sang together, and had many favourites and party pieces: Ralph McTell's 'Streets of London' was number one. He also sang Spancil Hill—though frequently changing the lyrics a little, just for the fun of it.

Work

After he finished school, Noel could easily have gone to university, but refused, because he was disappointed with his Leaving Certificate results. He went to England for two years, after which time he was persuaded to return home, and continue his studies in cost accounting. It was suggested he should sit the bank entrance examination.

At that time, to enter employment in a bank, one needed a backer, someone who had money. We did not meet that criterion, but one of father's suppliers agreed to act as sponsor. He later told us that Noel got first place in Ireland in the entrance exam.

His career in the Ulster Bank was a very successful one. He worked in several towns before being sent to Westport. By then he was an assistant manager. For part of his time in Westport he was in charge of the mobile bank, which he particularly enjoyed, as his route included some of the most scenic places in Ireland, including Achill Island. He turned down the chance to become a bank manager, as that might have required him to live in the branch, which he could not do, as he had to return to Kiltyhugh each weekend to take mother shopping on Saturdays and to church on Sundays.

Marriage and Fatherhood

In 1986, Noel married Gabrielle McMorrow. He'd had numerous girlfriends over the years, but it wasn't till he met Gabrielle that Noel decided that he had met the right person to settle down with. His marriage to Gabrielle was a very happy one and they had three lovely boys, Patrick, Richard and Edward. For his wife and children, the loss represented by his death is enormous, as he loved them so dearly, and was so caring of them that there was nothing he would not do for them.

Family was very important to Noel, and he loved our extended family, too, and spoke fondly of all our cousins, aunts and uncles, besides visiting them regularly.

We will miss Noel every day for the remainder of our lives. A kinder, gentler and more caring person I have not known. He was my best friend, confidant and adviser. He amused us, took care of us, and was always there for us. Modesty, humility, generosity and kindness were his great virtues. But alongside these he had the most wonderful sense of humour and an endearing streak of mischief. *Ní beidh a leithéad ann arís.*