

December 1967, amidst the fast thawing snow

Kevin McManus

THE MORNING IN mid-Winter dawned dull and gloomy with the sad news that my old school master, Sean Conway had passed away and with that, the thoughts of the upcoming Christmas festivities were soon forgotten. News spread quickly around the parish that the remains were to be interned later that day at two o'clock in the graveyard next to the old abbey walls.

As the hour of the burial approached I made my way to the small village of Killard where the narrow lane to Drumderg abbey and cemetery began. A small crowd had gathered as I took my place in the graveyard.

Sean Conway had taught in Killard national school as a young man of average build and agile as a deer. Many accounts and tributes were spoken of his prowess on the football pitch and how goalkeepers across the county dreaded to witness him grasp the ball and head for goal. To his pupils he seemed to be fond of a happy social life. Many a Monday morning saw him arrive shortly before school time, the drone of a car engine as it climbed the steep hill to the school alerted the children to his arrival. As a teacher he

lacked patience, but at laying down discipline he excelled. He relied more on force than persuasion, and the use of a rod with one end seasoned from a slight scorching in the fire.

Many years later after I had completed my education I became friends with Sean. I recalled sitting in his house and listening to him read from the paper about the German army's successes in North Africa during the war. He was a great admirer of General Rommel. On many nights during the Winter, as a bitter wind howled around his home in the valley and a cold moon rose in the eastern sky, he told me stories of his own military career as a guerrilla fighter in the "Tan War".

Sean's life was recently cut short on a journey home. He stumbled and slipped on the frost off a narrow bridge that traversed a river on the border of his property. All of his neighbours began a search for him and his lifeless body was discovered face down in the cold flowing waters of the river.

These were some of the thoughts that passed through my mind as I became aware of the funeral cortege approaching.

I removed my hat and bowed my head and solemnly watched the small procession that had silently walked the quarter of a mile journey from the village. When the funeral party reached the opened earth into which the body would be placed the mourners joined the priest in prayers and absorbed the words of comfort.

With reverence the gathering stood in silence as Sean Conway's remains were lowered into the dark, wet grave that had been dug adjacent to the walls of the old Abbey. When the grave was covered the silence was broken, now and then, by the sound of melting snow falling from the ivy on the Abbey wall in the thawing winds.

I turned to glance at my old school friend Pat Byrne who appeared as if standing in a daze, but it could well be that his thoughts were focussed on the soul departed.

Amidst the fast thawing snow and a slight wind that was bringing the year of '67 to a close, we all headed homewards with one thought in our minds, one soul has gone the road that someday we all must go.