

A BRUSH WITH HISTORY

Eugene Reilly

IN 1963 AND 1965 I had a brush with history, in that I met men who had experienced history. In 1963, I met a man who had been on the Titanic and in 1966 I met President De Valera.

1963 was also the year I started school. My teacher was the benign Miss Baxter. She had light ginger hair and I remember her using chocolate coated mallows as educational inducements.

1963 was also the year I sold my first drink. It was at the request of John Minagh. My father had sold his first drink to John Minagh. If I sold him a drink he would have bought a drink off four generations of us and missed out on only one generation. I sold him a bottle of stout for 11d.

John had worked in Glasgow as a young man. He was not long there when he was attacked by a gang of Celtic supporters as he was entering his lodgings. He got into the hallway and put one hand on each banister and felled every-one of his attackers with well aimed kicks from his long legs as they came in the door. Ever after the hooligans would give “the man in the green jacket” a wide berth and move away once they would see him coming.

One day in 1963 my mother brought me into the bar and introduced me to a big bulky American looking man with brown skin, a small hat and a cigar. She said “This man was on



■ On display in Eugene Reilly's public house in Carrigallem—a presentation wood carving commemorating the Titanic's launch in 1912

the Titanic”. I had been in the Mater hospital just before that and there I had seen a clockwork toy of a man taking a drink that looked remarkably like this man.

Years after I used to hear John Carty talk about a man from Colmcille who had survived the Titanic by hiding under the skirts of two sisters call Murphy. Whenever that film came out about the Titanic I thought of the man I met in 1963. I described him to people who would have known him and they identified him as Tom McCormac. In his official testimony after his rescue, he describes how he was in the water. He swam to a boat and was beaten away with oars by the sailors. The two Murphy sisters managed to pull him in at the stern of the boat.

In the days around 22 November 1963, my father was catching mice with a mousetrap that could catch five mice at once. It would

remind you of calves with their heads in a creepfeeder today. On the morning of 23rd November, I met Veronica Reilly on the back-pass. She said to me “President Kennedy was killed in a trap”.

In 1965, my wonderful teacher, Ms Baxter, was replaced by Miss Neagle. She was different from Ms Baxter. She was shorter, had dark hair, had a different disposition and was from Limerick.

In 1966 my father and I went

■ Tom McCormac





■ President John F Kennedy

down to Shannon to collect my uncle, Rev High Dolan, who was coming from America. We gave Ms Neagle a lift to Limerick. It was a Sunday and we stopped at different churches along the way and got parts of Masses. At Nenagh we stopped at an hotel for dinner. President De Valera was there having his dinner. He had been at the funeral of an old comrade. We were told that there would be an opportunity to meet the President after dinner.

Ms Neagle was trying to teach me phrases in Irish to say to the President. But I was more interested in looking out the window at a horse-drawn hearse parked in the inner courtyard of the hotel without the horses. As I stood in line to meet the President I was terrified because Ms Neagle was right behind me and I couldn't remember what I was supposed to say to the President in Irish.

I was the only child there. When I reached the President he put a finger and thumb under my chin and his other hand on top of my head. He spoke at length about the new generation of Irish people. He kept me with him as people filed past. I noticed that a lot of men instead of shaking hands touched their hats instead. At the end, he sat me on his knee and said that he liked to meet people from the next generation. To me the President didn't look as thin or as tall as he does in photographs. He looked more rounded, pleasant



■ President De Valera

and grandfatherly-looking. When we got outside there was a stylish car with a green canvas roof and a driver in military uniform waiting at the door.

Most of the people I have mentioned are now dead. But history lives in the memories of a younger generation that has encountered members of a generation immersed in history that is now deceased.

Sic transit Gloria munda.



■ Stephen Murphy with his partner Chelsea on Kala Patthar in the Himalayas with the sun rising over Mount Everest behind them. Always good to sport the county colours in far off lands!