Entertainment for Free

Peter Gordon

WORKING IN MOHILL in the 1950's and 1960's was not very profitable. However, to compensate for the low wages, the education provided was third level. The entertainment was nothing short of hilarious due to the amazing 'characters' that frequented the shop. As salaries in almost all occupations at the time were very low, many people devised ingenious systems for gaining admission to places of entertainment for free. These 'systems' included getting in windows, walking in backways so that the doorman did not know whether the person was going in or going out. Another trick was to walk in carrying a musical instrument, pretending to be a member of the band. Then there was the Snake Dance. "What is the Snake Dance?" I hear you ask? It was just sneaking in but pronounced 'Snake'.
My friend and great neighbour, Dermot Connellan, mentioned that when he was a Student in UCD he used to act as doorman at student dances. A girl would come running in the door shouting: "Quick, quick, quick I have to get to a toilet, quick" and then get 'lost' in the crowd at the dance.

Canon M J Masterson was Parish Priest of Mohill in the 1940s and 1950s. He was a very saintly man. He had no interest in money whatsoever. He never asked the parishioners for a donation. When he died, there was no money in the parish funds. The Church, the Canon's house, the Curate's house and the Parish Hall were all in a state of semi-dereliction. The Bishop became aware of the situation and appointed Canon Wall to the Parish. Amongst his terms of reference was the restoration of the parish properties. On his first Sunday as the `new Parish Priest, Canon Wall introduced himself to the congregation. He mentioned that he was born in Glebe Street, Mohill and was glad to be here. He then mentioned that the Bishop was alarmed at the state of the Parish properties and he had been asked by the Bishop to have them renovated. He then asked the parishioners to contribute as best they could to the parish funds. This was a bit of a 'culture shock' to many but most rallied to the cause and in due time the properties were in pristine condition.
There was an odd blip along the way of course. One of the curates, Fr Gill, was delegated to raise funds through running dances in the parish hall. He booked bands that were trying to launch themselves onto the showband circuit. Most of them were hopeless but probably came cheap or for nothing. Fr Gill was an excellent musician himself and knew only too well how bad these bands were. Not only did he play the piano very well but he also possessed a lovely tenor voice; his speciality was the *Melodies of Thomas Moore.* When people complained to him that the bands were hopeless he was not a bit impressed. He would reply to their complaints by saying: "What would they know about music—the only music they ever heard was the mugs falling off the dressers—sure they would not know the *Tantum Ergo* from *The Boys of Wexford!*
He ran the dances on a Sunday night an that was not a very good idea as the Cloudland Ballroom Rooskey and the Mayflower Ballroom Drumshanbo also had their weekly dances on Sunday nights. The big difference was these big ballrooms had Ireland's top Showbands on stage. As parishioners, we felt oblige to support the local dance, although it could be torturous at times. At one of these dances, Johnny Rowley, Micheal Crossan, Michael McGuinness and Sean Sheridan asked me if I would drive them to the Mayflower, where the Johnny Quigley All Stars were on stage. I agreed on one condition and that was that no one paid the admission fee but had to use their initiative and get in for free. Al agreed and soon they piled in to my trusty red Volkswagen Beetle BDI 261 ar we were on our way. On arriving in the car park at the Mayflower the local Garc Sergeant Michael Waters came over to greet me. He knew me well as we were both on the County Hurling Board at tha time. He also 'reffed' games in which I had played. At the time, our GAA club was having a 'difference of opinion' with the County Football Board. I was, and ha been, Secretary of the Club for about ten years. As a mark of protest we were supporting Sergeant Waters for the Chairmanship of the County Football Board. H thanked me profusely for our support. I asked him to walk in with me into the

`DERMOT ROOKE

THE BED AND THE PRAYER

Light
between arch of vision and pillow.

Outside, the world
is remaking itself
from sighs and flushing.
And as I slide to sit up in the morning
the morning is crushing
the quiet, the dark, gathering
it up like a skirt from the floor,
sitting at the edge of the bed,
embarrassed.

But I do not need to get up.
That is the first thought of every morning-
only here
can places hold
their names and
keep their shape
against age.
I can't think I'd miss something
change or some need in the flesh
appearing. Everything
is flush to the memory
between the prayer and the bed.

Only imagination can fit between-
if the curtain was open
then the town could move a shadow
across this room.

This town with its only flaw
that everyone is ugly
unless they are sleeping.

And if the shadows could reach in, then
the light and the sound
would pour their reality
like concrete around.

And if there was a town,
and if there was a centre of this town
it would be a silence
and a shadow that grows all morning
like a tangle of hair
missing from a young woman
that spills like silk
over a bed frame that was bare,
without anyone or myself to see it.

But there is just the bed that holds the
prayer-
may God protect us
from fleas,
ghosts and bad roads.

ballroom. As he was a very tall man I think the doorman did not see me walking in beside him.

The Johnny Quigley All Stars were from Derry. The Leader of the Band was, as the name implies, Johnny Quigley himself. He was reputed to be the best clarinet player in Ireland at that time. Johnny grew a beard and was nicknamed the "Londonderry Hair". Johnny played solos to which the great Hal Moffett also danced solo. Hal's dancing, which he created himself, was a mixture of Sean-Nos, Jitterbug and the Charleston. More people were looking at Hal than were dancing. When Johnny had finished playing a number, it was Hal that got the mighty applause and rightly so. The stewards wanted to stop Hal from doing his solo dancing but he would not hear of it. He stated that he had paid his admission fee to come in to dance but as the girls would not dance with him he decided to dance solo—

Result: Hal 1 Stewards Nil.

After a while I decided to go to the Ballroom restaurant for a cup of tea and a sandwich. Who should I see at one of the tables having their supper with one of the ballroom directors, only Johnny Rowley and Sean Sheridan. I said to myself: "This is initiative par excellence for sure". Johnny and Sean are progressive farmers. They know all that needs to be known about cattle. The ballroom director was a part time farmer and had advertised a few cattle for sale in the 'Leitrim Observer' that week. Johnny posed as a cattle dealer—Willie Leonnard from Castlederg, County Tyrone. On arriving at the Ballroom he asked for the advertiser of the cattle who arrived in a few minutes. They discussed the details of the cattle and made an appointment to meet the next day to complete the deal. Johnny pretended to walk away then turned to enquire if there was anywhere they could get a cup of tea. At that, our Heroes were brought in for their good supper.

The next day as I was going for lunch I met Johnny as he was cycling up the Main Street of Mohill. I said "You must hurry or you will be late for your appointment outside Drumshambo". He just laughed and waved as he peddled his way home.

A popular song written for the musical, "Good News" is "The Best Things in Life Are Free". This song was made popular by Frank Sinatra. You are free to believe it, or not, but we believed it anyway in the 1960's—we had no choice! In those times, most people were comparatively poor. We were too busy playing football and hurling to realise the fact that we were poor but we had fun and knew how to enjoy ourselves even with meagre resources.

"Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor".

'ELEGY IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD', THOMAS GRAY

Epilogue

The late Hal Moffett was an outstanding entertainer, singer and dancer. He was author of the bestselling book, "From Green Rush to the Aussie Bush". The book was autobiographical and dealt mainly with his travels in London, the Far East and Australia.