An Endangered Species

Aodhán Ó Céileachair

EVEN THOUGH WE were still in short trousers, moving into the Master's room was a very important milestone in our lives. During our three year stint with the mistress we received a good grounding and had mastered the art of reading, writing and sums. She taught us table manners, how to relate to other children and she even succeeded in getting us to sing in tune with the aid of a little tuning fork.

The mistress was the first woman we took into our confidence after shyly emerging out from under our mother's wing. She was a perfect lady and even though she had no children of her own, she fully understood all our little anxieties, mood swings and the devilment we got up to.

In my childhood innocence I expected that every girl and woman I encountered along life's path would possess her qualities. However, I soon found out that my belief was a little misguided and that they weren't all moulded from the same 'marla' as her.

Graduating into the master's room was more than just a change of classroom. There was far more to it than learning about percentages, the make up of a composition, the history of the Mass Rock or the geography of the drumlin hills.

Under the master's guiding hand we began our apprenticeship at becoming men.

We grew a few inches as we carved our names with the newly acquired penknife in the bark of the chestnut tree in the corner of the yard, following in the footsteps of many illustrious boys who had gone before. The sacredness of the leather ball in the brown wooden storage box in the porch was soon stripped away and we could now play a game in the muddy field without fear of getting a hiding from the older tougher boys or at least we could now fight back. Taking the slaps like a man for not being able to figure out Algebra or the Holy Trinity and learning how to suffer the pain of the pulling of a tooth without crying was all part of the apprenticeship.

As time progressed we got more adventurous and had the first drag of a Sweet Afton and we even picked up the art of 'scheming' in Burbage's field.

The master's influence went far beyond the classroom and he involved himself in every strand of Leitrim and Irish life from the GAA, to the church, to politics. From hedge school times these learned men shaped our country and our thinking. Seán MacDiarmada was so influenced by Master McGauran that he became the mind of the revolution of 1916.

Well the influence of the Master's hand is fast declining. In 2004, young boys leaving the mistresses' room have only a 20% or less chance of going into a master's room and an 80% chance of furthering their education with another mistress.

What affect will the demise of the master have on school life or on the wider society?

With such emphasis nowadays on environmental issues, the modern mistress may not take too kindly to the desecration of the chestnut tree or the carrying of bootfuls of mud into the classroom after the game.

Will the schoolboy of the future be a more cultured and refined creature or a more ruthless being or perhaps a confused figure. Signs are that the woman's touch is brushing off on the pupils. Many of our young people have a feminine look to them with their dyed hair, dangling ear rings and even tongue studs.

We once scared the daylights out of our schoolboy football opponents, (especially the Brylcream lads from the town) with our black appearance as we came straight to the game from wheeling turf in the bog. Now they try to out-charm the opposition with their tinted hair, nose rings and even hair pleats. It wouldn't work in our day. You'd be seen then as a bit of a 'sissy' and the object of much taunting.

If history should repeat itself and those lady teachers decide to spread their wings, expect a whole new playing field. Their full blooded entry into the national political scene would set alarm bells ringing in the ears of many leaders on both sides of the Irish sea and would certainly hasten the end of British rule

In the corriders of power
Leitrim Bord na nÓg officers: Attracta O'Reilly (Secretary) Carrick-on-Shannon, Walter Sharpley (Treasurer) Ballinamore & Mary Kenny, Carrigallen discussing strategy at their monthly meeting.

it was there, the old homestead radiantly waiting for them, in all its splendour, like a vision from a greeting card.

William was overwhelmed, he could hardly believe his own eyes, could this be an illusion of some kind? He got out of the car and there, waiting for his return as ever was his mother's old-fashioned rosebush in full bloom. Turning his eyes to the other side of the garden, he saw the lilac tree green and fresh as if she were smiling out at him. The house itself was stripped of its mask of plaster and whitewash and it stood unashamedly showing off its naked, but beautiful original stones. The roof was clad in solid old-fashioned blue bangor slates and there were new windows and doors replacing the old. The perfectly manicured garden was alive with colour and smell. All around, the tall Sitka Spruce trees stood back from the house, gently allowing the sunlight to caress it, and at the same time giving out a sense of safety and compassion in their shelter.

The front door was opened by a tall middle-aged lady who gazed from one to the other of her visitors. The Americans explained the reason for their intrusion into her privacy, and they were welcomed inside. The kitchen of old now served as the living room. The old black Stanley range was restored to its original state and it seemed to twinkle in the hearth. The floor was covered in stone slabs, and there was comfortable furniture all around the room.

The once important parlour was now the kitchen and dining area. This consisted of many pieces of restored furniture including the original old dresser. The remainder of the house was beautifully restored, with a large extension at the rear and a glass conservatory looking out onto the little river, which ran by the back of the house. The length of river had been cleared and large stepping-stones and pretty plants were strategically placed in and around it to create yet another heavenly vision. Outside the door of the conservatory was a glittering creation in a wall. The lady of the house explained that while she and her husband were reconstructing the house and gardens, they came across an old crockery dump, and with that crockery she designed a mosaic in the wall to honour those who had occupied the housed before them.

Tears came to William's eyes as he recognised the various bits of old mugs, cups, plates, and teapots, and a large piece of the old turkey platter that got broken many Christmases ago. It was when the cat got into the parlour and attacked the cooked goose on Christmas Eve, breaking all before him, in his effort to escape, when he was caught.

There were various other items from William's past placed in the conservatory and around the garden. There was the old last that his father used to repair the boots, the flat irons that his mother spent hours warming and using on the white shirts on a Saturday night in preparation for Sunday Mass, several different sized skillet pots and ovens from the open fire. There was an old rush candle holder, the wooden frame from an old radio, an assortment of horse and donkey shoes, wheels of carts, mowing machines and rakers, old clay pipes, jam-pots and blue and brown bottles of many shapes and sizes.

Inga and her husband Viadas now owned the house. They both teach German and Art, one in Mohill and the other in Drumshanbo. They left city life in Germany and came to Ireland searching for the 'Promised Land', and they found it here in Eslin. William smiled as he recalled how he left this very place fifty-six years earlier to find the 'promised land' in America, and now he discovers that it was here all the time.

Inga took her visitors into her art studio, which was the old cow byre and barn, now graciously converted into one, with an abundance of light pouring in through the large roof windows. William and his grandson were amazed at the artwork they beheld there. After searching in a corner, Inga produced a canvas with a painting she had recently created of the house and its surrounds. She presented the painting to William as a gift. She explained that she always gives her paintings a name and this one had not been named as yet. William gently took her creation in his hands and gazed on it lovingly.

This was the house where he was born and reared, the home he had abandoned in search of better things, the place he had let go of in his mind and as a result, died unto him, and now he found it again restored, nurtured and loved back to life. 'I name this painting 'The Resurrection', I will treasure it until the day that I die' said William gently, 'and I earnestly hope that it will be passed down through many generations of my family in years to come, to remind them of the mystery of life, and, most of all, to make them aware that their roots will always linger in that little place in Eslin in County Leitrim.

I AM

Ronan Gallagher

I am eternal, boundless and free
I am the Sky above and the Soil beneath
I am everything and I am nothing
Always present but forever unseen
I am Dark I am Light
I am Dusk I am Dawn
I am the great provider of all things
To all things
I am the Breath in your lungs
The Blood in your veins
I am Life I am Death
I am Night I am Day
I am Fire and I am Ice
Every leaf on every tree
I am River I am Lake
I am Land and I am Sea
I am the Mountain and the Valley
The Forest and the Stream.
I am the Wind in your hair
The Rain on your face
I am everywhere and nowhere
I have always held my place
I am eternal, boundless and free.