Bonfire Night in Ballinamore

Kevan Murphy

The 22nd of June was an important date in our schoolboy calendar. For us the annual pagan bonfire meant little about the summer solstice but a lot about tribal warfare over the bonfire itself and the marking of the onset of the school summer holidays, thank Christ!

In Ballinamore the bonfire territories were clearly marked. Firstly, there was High Street/Ceannabó, the faction that I belonged to.Then there was Church Street/Stradermot, our main competitors - an unruly mob from the other side of Fohera River. Aghadark were next in terms of their ability to organise and build a big bonfire and we admired their valiant efforts.

The townland of Tully to the east of the main street had a dedicated number who managed to get a reasonable bonfire going on the old railway line, albeit every second year. Lahard held a small group of fire-starters, a youth element that we never seemed to take seriously and they always lit their fire first and it blew out earliest for the convenience of all concerned who had to go to bed early.
Last but not least came Tarmon .If Ceannabó was Goliath then Tarmon was David, year after year they always made the effort to organise a bonfire of relatively ample proportions.

Ceannabó had traditionally located it's bonfire in a small quarry in Sweeney's field down Fohera lane.It was the lowest point imaginable, bonfires could hardly be seen from that location, unless up close, which we did in fact turning it into something of an event; There was a narrow path between the bonfire and the side of the quarry and the test was to run through this fire wall without sustaining serious injury. There was always the danger though of meeting someone in the middle who was running from the opposite direction.

While we enjoyed the craic of the 'fire run' this venue for the bonfire was no longer suitable if we were to win what was rapidly becoming a competition. We had no option but to move to higher ground, unfortunately there wasn't much higher ground in Ceannabó. There was in Lahard though and so we moved our bonfire up and into that hostile territory.

The quest for bonfire–tyres, was a constant and arduous one, we were on the look out for tyres during all waking hours, and we even dreamt about tyres. After school each day and during the weekend the hunt was on, the younger members of our unit were sent out on sorties down to the dump, it was a horrible job but someone had to do it. Diligently they dug deep into the rubbish pile in search of the precious tyres.They came back however with rat bites, ant stings and smelling like the dump but with precious few tyres, 'God help their wit', we'd say.
In Ballinamore back then there were three garage owners, Tommy Prior, Pat Joe Dolan and Pat Mc Manus. These men and their employees were like genies to us in the run up to bonfire night.

They had the power to grant our wishes of tubes, car tyres, front tractor tyres or 'Manna from Heaven' – a back tractor tyre.

Tommy Prior at the bottom of town we believed was sympathetic with the Aghadark group. Any old tyres that he had would go to Aghadark but it didn't stop us Ceannabós persecuting him every chance we got, that meant begging him for tyres on the way to school in the morning, on the way to and from lunch in the afternoon and then on the way home in the evening. With this happening five days a week, every week and with about forty of us begging, it wasn't long before we broke Tommy down, I can remember the Friday evening when he brought us all out the back of the garage and he told us to take what we wanted and that he didn't want to see 'sight nor light' of us again. Indeed we went home happy that weekend from Priors, each carrying a tyre in one hand and a schoolbag in the other.The following Monday morning of course it was business as usual, the campaign continued "Ehi Tommy have ya any tyres".

Celtic Spirals performing at the Market House in Carrick: Morgan McCaffrey, Fintan Bannon, Orla McCaffrey, Elaine Shortt, Karl McCarten & Sinéad Baxter

Pat Joe Dolan's was in the heart of High Street/Ceannabó territory, any discarded tyres on that premises would go straight to our cache. Pat Mac's garage, although it was subject to collection from the Lahardonians and even audacious poaching from other groups such as the Tullyites and the Tarmonians, I believed that it was for the most part a Ceannabó controlled premises. Every day, several times a day I'd ask John Fox first if anything had come in and then when John had gone for the tea, I'd go back and ask Pat Mac. Sometimes Pat would grab the nearest tyre to hand and throw it at my feet . Some of these tyres looked new and some had names written on them with chalk, they were obviously in for repair, anyway it was all for a good cause, "Thanks Pat".

The best craic of all, considering the risk of getting caught was the blatant truffing of tyres from silage pits. Only the most experienced of tyre larcenists were called upon for this job.

Scouts were out on a daily basis after school scouring the countryside for remote silage pits containing tyres. The following day raiding parties of five or six volunteers would be selected in the schoolyard to be sent out to procure the valuable booty. Sometimes two or three dedicated columns could be out at any given time on silage pit raids. Some farmers tried in vain to keep watch on their tyres, a futile exercise though, because we'd bide our time like foxes watching hens.

Sweeney's piggery was our Fort Knox. We stored our tyre bullion there, packed tight to the ceiling in the individual sow units, needless to say the piggery was without pigs at the time.

This location was ideal, right in the heart of Ceannabó, under surveillance most of the time and semi-subterranean making it difficult to remove tyres if a raid from another faction were mounted, such raids were a constant threat.

It was during second Mass one Sunday, just as we were about to give thanks to God for providing us with all our tyres, that the alarming news spread quickly through the chapel like influenza. The Stradermots were mounting a raid on our tyre cache at the piggery, we couldn't believe it, how could they? We looked around us, where were they? No sign of the Stradermots anywhere in the congregation, it was obvious they had all gone to first Mass in preparation for this, 'The 2nd Mass Tyre Raid'.

The next day at school the battle lines were drawn, it was Ceannabós against Stradermots and all others knew to stay clear. The football at break time turned into a covert shin-kicking bout, nobody walked alone for fear of attack, the two factions no longer sat together in class, homework couldn't be cogged anymore from those across the river. All lines of communication had been cut, it was civil war in the boys school.

When the summer solstice and bonfire night finally arrived, from the summit of Lahard hill we looked down on the town below, a trickle of smoke drifted slowly skyward from the bonfire lit by those young folk in Lahard lower. We could see the smoke from Aghadark in the distance and also Stradermot, Tully could be seen down to the east and high up on Tarmon hill to the west the black smoke from their bonfire raised proudly.

It was now time to light ours, formality and ceremony were dispensed with, no speeches or cutting of tape, it was every man for himself, in with matches, newspaper, hay and even bottles of petrol to get the thing lit as quickly and as uniformly as possible, before long it was one hell of a fire. A party atmosphere ensued with the old pagan spirits inherent in us all coming to the fore, as we ran,

danced, fell and fought around the mighty blaze. Some just lay down on the surrounding warmed-up grass gazing blindly into the flames, slugging out of fizz-flat bottles of Fun, others disappeared out into the field and into the shadows to suck at illicit cigarettes.

We would gladly have stayed there until dawn watching the bonfire as it died like the darkness of the night into day but an onslaught of anxious mothers landed like cackling hens chiding and "giving off" to their respective offspring, "What time of the night do you call this to be out? look at the state of you, black from head to toe, get home right now...buc buc bucaaawwwwk".

And so these over broody mothers hen-pecked their smoke blackened children off down home despite the protests and pleas for mercy; at home scrubbing brushes came out to remove the blackness and it wasn't until the young bonfire-goers were clean and identifiable that the mothers in question then had to release them, as these proved not to be their children at all.

We never established who had the best bonfire that night, we would argue that we emerged winners, but others would have a different view. Whatever your opinion, it was the last big traditional bonfire night in Ballinamore and I'm almost glad because of the air pollution it caused, not to mention the way it divided the town up so acrimoniously. Some of us Ceannabós still have it in for the Stradermots. *Coimhéad fearg fhear na foighde.* Beware of the anger of a patient man!

FRAGMENTS OF ETERNITY

Eamon MacGuailrig

You can have beauty at your doorstep and scenery for free
But with heart and mind not focussed we are too
blind to see.

You may travel o'er the nation in search of God knows what
But when its least expected you may discover
what you've got.

From Glencar now to Ballincar and across to Sligo bay
This Leitrim son has left his home to go the Sligo way,
That journey now it wasn't long, he didn't go too far
Still he'll gaze from his doorstep at the beauty of Glencar.

You may travel o'er the nation, you may ramble near and far
Yet nowhere can compare I think to my own
dear sweet Glencar
As you gaze at rugged landscape
untouched by human hand.
You'll sense an inner feeling, a real closeness to this land.

There are places on this universe
in our lifetime we'll not see
But I don't mind at all myself for in Glencar I'll be
And if I reach a ripe old age as I wish and hope I do
That just before I shut my eyes I'll have Glencar in view.

I'll see its rugged landscape and its slopes all heather clad.
The waterfall that Yeats so loved where I rambled as a lad
That lake a gem of beauty shared by two counties fair
Silent in the twilight among the shadows I'll be there

From Glencar now to Ballincar and across to Sligo bay
This Leitrim son has left his home to go the Sligo way
That journey now it wasn't long, he didn't go too far
Still he'll gaze from his doorstep at the beauty of Glencar.