

EASTER 1966

Stan McWilliams

IT IS EASTER 1966. I am 14, in third year at secondary school—Ballymena Intermediate. The car is packed and we're on our way to Larkfield, outside Manorhamilton in County Leitrim; five of us and all that a young family need for the week, there is room for little else. I am the eldest, aged 14, in the back seat along with Nigel 7, Elaine 10, and Ivor 12. I am probably the grumpiest; making this trip three or four times a year, I now feel more bored and less excited. Rhyming off the towns until we cross the border is old hat, though the younger ones are still at it: Ahoghill, Portglenone, Bellaghy—no, too soon to start that—Castledawson—on and on they go—Fivemiletown, Augher, Clogher, Enniskillen—now we are getting somewhere—Letterbreen, Belcoo and into the Free State at Blacklion. Count the donkeys in rushy fields, through Glenfarne, to golden ice cream at Cooney's in Manorhamilton; then, ice cream cleaned up we're soon out the three miles along the Larkfield Road and there, the familiar farmhouse on the left, up the lane at Boggaun and we are here; at last!

We spill out of the car into the small yard. The car is emptied, bags taken inside and distributed around the bedrooms. Boxes of food are piled on the kitchen table. Mother (Annie Davis, 1889-1978) and daughter (my mother, Ena McWilliams 1923-2015) exchange hugs and greetings. We are all hugged and appraised, each in turn, and showered with compliments by Granny, while Uncle Cecil



looks on and smiles approvingly. I'm awkward now with these welcomes but they're soon over, the cramped journey is forgotten and we're running around over familiar territory: looking into sheds, around corners, through the hayshed, Ivor and myself going further afield. I come across two very short ladders—one painted green and red, the other yellow and blue—made for us by my grandfather (Richard Davis 1882- 1961), now discarded as toys. Uncle Cecil (1924 - 2010) shows us a recently born calf and new bull.

"And have you heard our new hit song?", he asks with a laugh. We haven't, but we soon would, many times, hear Larry Cunningham and the Mighty Avons sing their No 1 hit on the radio, "Lovely Leitrim", with Cecil's stumbling attempt to sing along. Cecil had seen him live in the local dancehall and was enjoying the brief spotlight that shone on Leitrim.

*The Family group consists of:
Back Row: Ena (Helena), Herbie (Herbert) Annie Davis (nee Gillmor) Reco (Richard)
Front row: Cecil, Phyliss, Wallace, Alf (Alfred) Jack (John)*

TAKEN AT LARKFIELD, BOGGAUN c.1936

My father (Tommy McWilliams 1915 - 2003) will spend the night here and will leave the next day to go back to work; the holidays of a bread man are short when everyone wants fresh bread daily. His jolly banter and humour go down well and news from the North is always welcome, particularly when it reflects our happy, growing and apparently prosperous family.

My grandfather died 5 years earlier and mother and son have settled into new domestic and farm routines. Differences between them could break into petty bickering, probably exacerbated by Cecil's thwarted wish to marry some years earlier.

Electricity came to Boggaun in early 1961 and a black and white TV sits over the old radio with its glass-cased battery. The floor of the kitchen is covered with grey lino and the outline of flagstone shows through. A brown leather backseat taken from a family car wreck has been replaced by a simple settee. Since Granda died the open fireplace has been closed up and a Stanley range sits against the wall with a fireside chair, table and dresser, the room now looks smaller.



Richard & Annie Davis c. 1959.

On Easter Sunday we pile into Uncle Cecil's green Morris Minor van which the previous week carried fattened pigs to Denny's in Sligo for slaughter. It had been scrubbed clean and the floor covered with cushions for our short journey to Cloonclare Parish Church, built within Sir Fredrick Hamilton's 17th century garrison. The church has a scattering of parishioners with some Easter visitors, a small choir, and prevailing sense of the past. The form of service is prescriptive and stiff by comparison to the more informal tone of our usually packed Presbyterian Church. I'm there on sufferance, easily distracted by a few attractive girls I haven't seen before and the riff from The Beatles, Day Tripper running in my head. We are soon back to the farmhouse for an Easter Sunday dinner that is a wonderful spread of simple food, usually lamb or beef, prepared and eaten in the small kitchen.

I couldn't miss the front cover of the RTE Guide, in eye catching full colour, the 50th anniversary edition for the 1916 Irish Rebellion, The Easter Rising. I really haven't any idea what it's about. Radió Telifis has a full week's schedule of drama and documentary programmes on The Rising. Television and moving pictures are still novel for us and with only one

channel we watch "Insurrection", the nightly centrepiece. I'm glued to it from the start; we all watch, or most of us anyway. It features a studio newscaster reporting on the rebellion as it happens, with roving reporters out on the streets, and interspersed with dramatised scenes from the main centres of the action.

Some years previously on a short holiday to Dublin—perhaps a romantic revisit of Mammy and Daddy's honeymoon trip—we stayed in a B & B on O'Connell Street. With my brother, Mammy and Daddy, we walked past Nelson's Column when it still stood tall, and past the GPO with its impressive columns fronting the street. So, when the GPO appeared on screen it felt vaguely familiar. For whatever reasons I am immediately hooked and engrossed with "Insurrection". We watch in silence except for Granny's regular "Tut! Tut!" or occasional disparaging remarks as she knits and dozes in her chair by the range. When it finishes no one speaks. My two younger siblings have long gone to bed. The silence is broken by the kettle set on the range for supper and by Cecil as he gets up and goes outside to check the cows in the byre. Later, I'm sure I overhear them talking about it in hushed urgent tones, catching broken phrases like and "too young"

and "they'll have to hear it sometime". Our days are filled with farm jobs, and house jobs, and this week Ivor and I will go with cattle to Manorhamilton fair. Hand milking of the 8 or so cows starts the daily routine—this stopped about 1969 when the dairy cows were replaced by beef suckler cows—but we were too slow to be useful and take to other jobs: clearing the dung from the channel behind each of the tethered cows and pitching the wet mass through the window onto the midden, or carrying armfuls of hay and buckets of water up to the cows heads; squeezing between them we soon know which one might kick, being careful around cows with new calves, and more relaxed around the older ones. The cow byre with its hayloft—converted from the old farm cottage—is warm with a strong familiar odour. During a wintery shower or down pour it is a welcome shelter, its dim space quietly alive with the sounds of contented animals. Later in the morning I carry a bundle of hay on my back to outlying cattle on drier fields about a half a mile away, knowing every path and shortcut, each gap in the hedge and foot stick over the sheughs.

Granny, who seems to be getting smaller

each time we visit, churns milk each week to supply the house with butter; when she has the churn set up there is a rush to help her. We love the deep splashing of dash, but it is hard work and soon there are calls for help as arms quickly ache. At Easter time the fields are often sodden and little work can be done on them, but if it has been unusually dry a ploughman will spend a day turning the sod in a small field for potatoes and oats. The first tractor arrived here in 1970. Sometimes we set off with Cecil to burn gorse bushes on an out-farm. Later that year Ivor was to leave a hay field with a heavy sky promising rain to watch a World Cup match on TV. Cecil was so shocked and silently angry that I don't think Ivor's reputation ever recovered.

"Insurrection" portrays the rebellion as amateurish and insignificant against the organised might of the British Empire, but iconic in its assertion of independence. I quickly become bound up with the characters and their stories. The leaders of the Rising are stoic at the signing of the Proclamation of an Irish Republic and become more vulnerable and complicated as the drama unfolds. I hear the unfamiliar names: James Connolly, Pádraig Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh, Thomas Clarke, and Sean MacDiarmada, from nearby Kiltyclogher. From the first premature shot fired from inside the GPO, I sense it is going to fail. James Connolly's character at the GPO gradually accepts that The Rising is doomed; Pádraig Pearse, in his final letter to his mother from a prison cell on the night before his execution, writes the heart breaking line "I will call to you in my heart at the last moment, your son, Pat"; the daily executions in Kilmainham Gaol follow the failed rebellion; and James Connolly being

stretchered from the gaol hospital to the ambulance and on to Kilmainham Gaol where he is executed, seated, as he could not stand: they all leave me tense and sometimes angry. The gathering around the television has become a nightly silent family event, not discussed or mentioned afterwards.

One evening near the end of the series, as the credits start to roll, I get up sharply and go outside into the cold air, walk the 30 yards or so up the track to the old car wreck lying next to the vegetable garden. A dog barks across the valley. The full moon, just turned, is reflected in the car's shiny black surface; shadows of the clouds drift silently across the silvered landscape; up on the mountain, O'Donnell's Rock, it's bright as day. I breathe deeply and think of men drawing on cigarettes. I start to shiver, turn from the mountain and go back inside to the soft sound of voices and the smell of warm tea and toast.

Granny was the only one of us who was alive in 1916. My mother, Ena born in 1923 and Uncle Cecil in 1924 must have been taught the basics of Irish history in Mullaghduff National School in nearby Killargue. Ivor and I born and brought up in Northern Ireland and going to state schools know nothing of Irish history and certainly nothing of the Easter Rising. The previous summer Granny got very upset when she found an old tea box with a picture of the Queen Elizabeth II, defaced. The small box held rusty nails and lay amongst tools and various bits of rusty metal in the shady light of the stable. How she spotted it I will never know, but spot it she did and thereafter started an inquisition lasting a few days—When was it done? Who has been here? Which one of them could it be? "Bad

cess to them! Bring all that to this house." she repeated over the following days, clearly troubled. By contrast Cecil passed off the repeated questioning with little comment and showed no interest in finding the culprit responsible for the Monarch's defacement.

Bogaunn and Ballymena, The Free State and Northern Ireland, Manorhamilton and Cluainin O'Rourke, Ireland and the United Kingdom: as I go North again, home and back to school, a door has been cracked open and I can see into a place that's part of my history, and in time it will open further. In three months, I'll be back to Larkfield, in Lovely Leitrim, to haymaking and saving turf, to the World Cup and Gaelic football on television, walking cattle to a fair in Drumkeeran and Sunday afternoon trips to Bundoran—my education will continue.

Please see Stan McWilliams blog at www.thecurlewscall.com

NOTES:

See RTE archives for a summary of "Insurrection" www.rte.ie/archives/category/media/2016/0309/773625-insurrection/

For a discussion of RTE's programming over the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising see: www.theirishstory.com/2010/11/18/a-tv-pageant-%E2%80%93-the-golden-jubilee-commemorations-of-the-1916-rising/#.XMB-Gt6R7kdU

"Cluainin O'Rourke" and "Manorhamilton" were both displayed on road signs clearly indicating the change of ownership of the area during the 17th century plantation of Leitrim. These road signs were gradually replaced when Ireland took on the metric distances in 2005.

Thanks to Pádraig Fitzpatrick for his sharp memory and review.