The Chapel on the Hill

Mary McEnroy

Glenade Church

THE RECENTLY re-contructed wall fronting the Glenade parochial buildings is more imposing, more decorative, more demanding of a second glance than its demure predecessor. It is marginally inaccurate to call this skilled re-juggling of the original materials a 'new' wall. For it differs very little from its fore-runner apart from its striking good looks, its further-from-the road present position and the void where the 'stables' stood.

If records could, indeed, be written in stone, unparalled archives would have been chronicled in these. For they, most likely of Leitrim origin, have been taking stock of the changing face of the country-side for about 150 years.

We'd have, for deciphering, unembellished by fantasy, unfaded by time, images of its uncluttered view of the down-trodden, scaling the almost vertical Cleragh slopes. Men and women taking the short-cut to Sligo, laden with the garnered butter—their pathetic farm's rack-rent ransom. Their footwear slung by laces around their necks. Boots or clogs to encase, on the outskirts of the town, their bruised and bleeding feet.

We'd have stories of the streams of god-parents, arriving on foot, from townlands far and near, cuddling their precious bundles, cuddling them with solicitude lest they'd die before baptism and their souls abide forever in Limbo. We'd learn of the marriages at 9am. Mass, of more tragic couplings under veil of darkness, the contracting parties hieing from undisclosed places. They'd remind us of the huge and heavy wrought-iron gate, the post-box buried in the wall close by. This summer the bees took possession, inflicting their venomous stings on anyone daring or unwary enough to insert a letter. How the mischievious-prone too lavishly smeared the facial bumps with Reckitt's bag-blue.

The new wall stands erect and stately. In spots, the other had sagged and reclined into the buttressing field, which defacement may have been aided by the weight of bodies leaning against it, perched upon it, maybe, the better to enjoy the after-ceremonies confabs.

Unlikely that the seriously diminished numbers now replacing that milling throng will speedily mar the existing contour. A far cry from,the crowds that trudged miles to Mass; to the confession 'stations; to missions; to Confirmations, in all weathers and all seasons,drenched on their way to the morning mission Mass, back for the evening sermon, often attired in the same dripping clothes. Or burnt to a cinder on the bog during a heat wave. The many waiting their turn at the 'Clearing Station', grateful for the boon of a stranger to confess to.

The stable stones would have their own tales to tell. Of the priest's side-car or trap in the nearest compartment, his horse tethered in the middle room, the southern-most chamber piled high with fodder. Of how, later, they witnessed the trap displaced by the 'horse-less carriage', the bay or the chestnut around no more. Of the horse's and hay's quarters usurped by the neighbour-hood equines during Mass. Of those same noble animals relinquishing their position in society to the bicycle and the motor. Of their brief re-appearance during the World War 2 curtailment of petrol, when good smuggling skills were of the essence to keep the ageing bikes in good nick and maintain a supply of tyres and tubes for them.

Inside information would have embedded itself in the environs. About the original gravel floor and nowhere else to sit or kneel. Just the luck of the draw that dress fabrics were thick and skirts long. Tidings about the relief the 'forms' brought jubilation at the arrival of the unyielding pews, later, the wreckers of joints when hem-lines barely reached the knees. Memories of shivering in the dank, musty air. Of the damp creeping up the mildewed gables. Of the flaking paint and plaster.

More agreeable rumours would have etched themselves in the stones. Latter- day anecdotes of repairs, replacements, installations. Of roof, dry-lining, seats, of heating, of padded kneelers, of electric lighting, of amplifiers, of a toilet for all, of many things.

Hard to believe that the first wall was as fair of face in the 1800s as to-day's is to-day, just as difficult to accept that this one will present to the world a similar sombre, grey visage in a century or so. Pointless to try to guess what may, by then, be engraved on the surrounding. Or whether or not the bats will have survived pollution.