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Leitrim County Council

# A Good Way to Say 'Thanks'

I slowed down and stopped. The old doctor was out for a walk beside his beloved Clooneen and welcomed an ear that would listen to some of his thousand amusing anecdotes. I told Dr. Harry that I had been appointed Social Worker with Leitrim County Council; that it involved travelling throughout the county visiting those with housing problems and interpreting each situation for the council. Many a time over the past 26 years, and especially now that I have retired, I've remembered his solemn exhortation to me on that day 'My good man, thank your God every morning you wake up that you have been privileged to work among your own people in Leitrim.' I have talked to and, I hope, helped thousands of people in the county in the course of my work and where better than in the pages of the 'Leitrim Guardian' to record my admiration for these people and my total agreement with the sentiments of the old doctor now gone to his eternal rest.

It was lee-ground in Leitrim County Council. I was the first Social Worker to intrude on the old fixed establishment but the Council soon found work enough to keep me busy and I fitted in easily into the council structure. Outside, throughout the county, it was almost plain sailing from the beginning and, whatever the problem, civility and friendliness reigned supreme. I say 'almost' because from early days I found it prudent to put on headsheaves. In other words,

having introduced myself outside the door: 'My name is Des Flynn and I'm a Social Worker with Leitrim County Council' I went on, very quickly, to explain the nature of my work and generally indicate that my mission was benevolent, that I had no designs on their jugulars. I'll tell you why. For a start, 26 years ago there was the odd one apt to get a seizure if he stumbled on a social anybody at his very door. He had visions of an official, not content with a roost-count, straining his neck under a bush, counting every hen and chicken perched in the branches. Every bird counted could block or reduce weekly payments, or he might be thinking about the plotman who came out to measure, step after step, the yardage of drains in the bottom field. No, not the 500, only 487 yards. It was said he ended up in 'Casualty' in Sligo and shortened his life taking long steps.

I had another reason for my long-tailed introduction: Driving down a quiet road I saw him, a middle aged man and he was fairly lifting them, heading for the town. It was only as I passed that he stuck out his hand for a lift, leaving himself a 30 yard dash to the car. In my mirror I saw him break into a canter-trot and, in seconds he was at the car door. Friendly normal chat for a while. Then my friend got cat-curious, 'you wouldn't be from these parts I'd be thinking.' The mountain bear has a keen eye for traps. 'No' I said, 'but

I've been on this road before. I'm a Social Worker.' Well I can tell you Zeus, in his heyday, never hurled a thunderbolt with such dramatic effect. All quiet from there to town. I stopped to let him out. Now an old friend of my father's visited our house many years ago. He had been in the First World War, didn't talk about it very much but he had survived two bayonet charges and explained what that involved. As he did so, the poor man's face changed. The fear, the brutality, the horror were all written on his countenance. But poor Joe Meehan's face was mild besides the face of my friend as he tried to lift his left leg out of the car – the stiffness, the torture, the excruciating pain Oh Lord! Finally he lifted his leg out with his two hands and escaped, hobbling, in a continuous genuflection to a nearby tavern.

Where are they all gone, maybe a thousand all told, forming two hundred families? They gave their names to several places in Leitrim 'The Tinker's Cross', 'The Tramp's Hill', 'The Tramp's Bush', 'The Tinker's Hollow'. Well, they became 'itinerants' for a while and then became 'travellers' and, while this was happening, they abandoned the rural areas and moved in beside towns and villages. Most have migrated or emigrated but, for 30 years, there has been a fairly steady population in the county of 25 Leitrim traveller families. They are concentrated now in Mohill and Carrick-on-Shannon. All have been

provided for in the accommodation of their choice a few in houses, the remainder on serviced halting sites. At a time when, nationwide, twelve hundred families are on the side of the road clamouring for accommodation, Leitrim can be proud of its achievement. But, for someone who saw them twenty six years ago, in their broken-down caravans and smokefilled camps, the feeling is one of relief as well as pride.

Forget, for a moment, the recent mindboggling growth in villages and towns. They are there for all to see on every road, every laneway in the county, the most extraordinary development in new and modernised houses. Lawns, shrubs and flowers have taken over the 'calf field' and garden gnomes have replaced the crowing rooster.

While all this was happening in the world of private housing, Leitrim County Council was involved in a major effort to provide housing for the elderly. In this endeavour, Leitrim has led the rest of the country by a proverbial mile. Upwards of three hundred houses in seventeen different locations. I, for one, regard it as the Council's greatest achievement and I see in it a public, practical acknowledgement of our debt to the elderly, a way of thanking those who have done so much to make Leitrim lovely.

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LATE SEPTEMBER

*Nina Havers*

*Two grey horses in a wet field,  
All bony legs and raindark hides,  
Cold grey lake behind, the grey sky above,  
The very grasses and rushes grey,  
The bare trees weeping wet bark  
All wrapped and veiled in timeless rain.  
I smell the winter coming.*

## THE NATIVITY PAINTING

*Arthur Laird*

The Nativity Painting by Karl Gustav Plagemann which is now in St George's Church, Carrick on Shannon, has an interesting and varied history.

It seems it was first owned by a monastery in Italy and was bought at an auction there by Charles Manners St. George. He had been British Ambassador in Turin, among other cities. He was also landlord of Carrick on Shannon.

He brought the painting home to Ireland and it was among a large collection of paintings in his house in Fitzwilliam Place in Dublin. In 1837 he presented it to St George's Church in Carrick on Shannon. Kate Cullen, mother of Susan Mitchell, saw it hanging there during her residence in Carrick in the 1860s.

In 1854 the doctrine of The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was defined by the Pope as an Article of Faith for the Roman Catholic Church. After this there was a widening of the devotional gap between the Churches. Devotion to the Virgin Mary became less popular in the Anglican Church, just as it became more important in the Roman Catholic Church. On account of this the Vestry of St. George's Church decided to remove the painting and they gave it back to the St. George family.

In 1879 St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church was built in Carrick on Shannon and Petronella Hallberg, inheritor of the St. George estate, presented the painting to it. It remained hanging in the sacristy there until about 1960. At that time repairs were being carried out to St. Mary's Church. The Parish Priest, Canon Kearney, got a valuer from Dublin to put a price on it. He valued it at seven shillings and sixpence in old money, (37.5 pence decimal coinage)! Canon Kearney decided to give the picture to the Marist Sisters. So it remained hanging behind the stage in the concert hall of the Marist Secondary School, later Marymount College, until 1980.

Canon Ivan Biggs came to St. George's as Rector at that time, and as he admired the painting, the Marist Sisters decided to give it to him. The Canon accepted and he asked Martin Beirne, Cortober, to bring it to St. George's. Some help was got and it was loaded on to Martin's lorry. When it arrived at the Church it could not be got in as it was too big for the door. As it then started to rain, the picture was brought to Martin's home and was left on the lorry in the hayshed.

After a few days' rain the weather took up and another attempt was made. This time Canon Biggs brought a saw and cut the frame in half! The picture and frame were then got into the Church, where it now remains, leaning against the wall. It is rather dark and discoloured, the clearest part being the Virgin's face. Martin Beirne explained that the reason for this is that he had got a raw potato, which he cut in half and then rubbed it against the face until he cleaned it!

The Historical Society have shown great interest in the painting and, with the help of Hilary Pyle, have got two experts from the National Gallery to come and examine it. Their opinion is that it is well worth cleaning and refurbishing, and that members of their staff can do this work in the Church without having to move the painting to Dublin. It is intended to get this work done after St. George's Church building itself is renovated.