

GROWING UP IN IRELAND

by Liam Connellan, CII

I grew up in Strokestown of the 1940s. It was a town of about 700 people nestling in a valley of the undulating mid-Roscommon countryside, dominated by Slieve Ban to the South. The nearest towns were Longford (14 miles), Roscommon (12 miles), Castlerea (18 miles), Elphin (6 miles), and Rooskey (10 miles).

We lived in a house at the top of Elphin Street, across the road from the Marist Brothers Community House and Boys School. I started school with the Marist Brothers on the day after my sixth birthday, having gone to infant school at the local Mercy Convent. The small community of three Marist Brothers brought an international perspective to the town as they had been educated or worked in sister houses in France and Scotland, as well as elsewhere in Ireland. This experience influenced their teaching and thier contribution to the local community.

One of my earliest recollections is that of Brother Kevin knocking on our door at 8 o'clock one morning and shouting in an excited voice that France had capitulated. I didn't know what that meant but my mother's response left me in no doubt that the news was bad. It was 1941 and Europe was at war.

All the able bodied men of the town, including my father, joined the local defence forces and paraded in military uniform along the main streets, and learnt how to use a gun. War bound aeroplanes frequently flew low over the town and on one occasion a German plane crash landed in a field three miles away. The pilot was arrested and transferred to the Curragh, and on the following day hundreds of people cycled out to see the plane which was guarded by a contingent from the Irish army. I was fortunate to get a lift on the back of a neighbour's bike.

From then on I listened with special attention to news broadcasts on Radio Eireann, BBC and occasionally to the German radio broadcasts of Lord Haw Haw. Children sang war time jingles about the food rationing of the "loaf of brown bread and the half ounce of tea" and occasional uncomplimentary jingles about Hitler. We marvelled also that the Emperor of Japan was so wealthy that he had a new suit for every day of the year.

However, life went on normally in our town. The first signs of activity each day were at about 8 o'clock when the Brothers went to Mass, and some of the local shopkeepers who also had small farms drove their cows back to the fields after milking. The shops did not open until after the arrival of the bus from Athlone which brought the newspapers at 10.15am. By that time Brother Kevin would be well into his work at the school teaching the boys subjects as diverse as the wonders of the Harland and Wolf Shipyard, among the largest in the world; how the proportional representation electoral system worked, or teaching them to sing the Dies Irae. Our first schoolboys choir attempt to sing at a Requiem Mass was ironically on the death of a local doctor who had been a benefactor to John McCormack at the start of his singing career.

In summertime, home life revolved around weeding the vegetables in the garden; cutting turf, and making preparations for bonfire night. Bonfire night was on St John's Eve, the 23rd of June. For weeks beforehand the young boys of the locality gathered branches of trees, and tyres of motor cars. Two of the streets in the town had a big bonfire, and there was always great competition as to who would have the best. Occasional raids were made on one another's stock pile of branches in the days immediately beforehand. The bonfire was lit at about 9 o'clock in the evening, and two hours later most of the youngsters were sent home to bed. Then the local melodeon, and fiddle players arrived for an evening of music and dancing which went on until the small hours.

Gaelic football and swimming were the main recreations. Roscommon won their first All Ireland Football Title in 1943. I can still remember the excitement in our home as Michael O'Hehir described every kick of the match against Cavan and the excitement with which I posted the result on our gate post. All the local youngsters wanted to emulate the skills of Jimmy Murray and his team. The only contact with soccer was through reading the exploits of Cannonball Kid in "The Champion" every week. On sunny Sunday afternoon there were clusters of men outside the front windows of houses where wirelesses were placed so that they could hear Michael O'Hehir bringing alive the Match of the Day. We swam in Clonfree lake about two miles outside the town. There we learned the dog paddle and the breast stroke, and also to take care of one another if we got into difficulty.

Each Summer there was a carnival for local charity in the grounds of the local ballroom. Loudspeakers blared out the hits of the day like "Don't Fence Me In" prior to the nightly dance, and the children played on swing boats and chair-o-planes.

In winter with the onset of frost, the boys made a slide downhill along the middle of Elphin Street. Most youngsters had boots with steel studs hammered into the soles in order to prevent wear. These were ideal for sliding on ice. Some of the children wore wooden clogs from Holland which were cheaper but far less comfortable than leather boots. In the Winter of 1947 we had snow which lasted for three weeks. Buses were abandoned in snow drifts and the combination of sunshine and snow made Strokestown like an Alpine village. I remember one of the Brothers taking about six of us young lads for an eleven mile unforgettable walk in powdery snow and sunshine.

Strokestown in the 40's reflected a very different economic and trading environment to that of today. The emergency created by the Second World War had thrown Ireland back on its own resources. Only essential products were imported. Consumer imports were negligible since these products were not manufactured in a wartime Europe, concentrating on the battle for survival. A small number of private passenger cars which had been purchased prior to the war had their tyres removed and were mounted on blocks in garages as no petrol could be purchased for non essential use.

Ireland was a major supplier of foodstuffs to wartime Britain. This brought relative prosperity to Strokestown. The town was a service centre to agriculture, the primary industry of the area and served a population of 2,000 people within a five mile radius. It had two forges (Pat Stapleton's and Peter Hayden's); O'Neill's Bakery; Whelan's Monumental Sculptures; Greene's and Shevlin's shoe repair shops; two furniture makers; Ryan's sawmills; two dressmakers; Flanagan's makers of gleaming blue and red horse carts; two garages; and three hotels. There were also four solicitors, three doctors, two vets and a dentist. There were 27 licensed public houses, relics of a time when the population of the hinterland was very much larger. Chapman's cinema showed not only imported films but also local newsreels which generated even greater interest.

There was a market day each Friday, and a monthly cattle fair. The cattle fair commenced in the street outside our house at about 5.00am and a toll was collected on each animal by the steward from the local demesne as buyers drove their cattle out the Elphin Road. Cattle always got lost at fairs and it was a regular occurrence for some distraught farmer to call to the school the following day to enquire if anyone had seen a "stray polly".

The town could supply directly a great many of the needs of the population. Since there were no private cars, the great majority of household requirements were bought locally. Even creamery butter came only from Candons of Boyle 18 miles away, and competition from the local bakery came from Twibills in Elphin whose vans displayed the somewhat ambiguous slogan that "There is no Bread like Twibills". Most people cut their own turf and what coal there was, came from nearby Arigna.

It is probable that even if there had not been an emergency in force, the economic structure would have been the same, since Ireland's industrial policy, similar to that introduced by many other countries after the great depression of the early 1930's, concentrated on the development of local industries behind high protective barriers.

There was an air of quiet prosperity in the area. It was self-sufficient in most things, lacked luxuries, and although emigration was high, as many went to work in hospitals and factories in wartime Britain, it had not yet reached the haemorrhage proportions of the 1950's.

The return of peace to Europe resulted in high demand for labour in Britain, and created more competition for Irish products. These factors combined with technological advances made during the war and the international recession of the mid-50's to have a dramatic effect on small, rural towns like Strokestown. Many of the industries such as forges and horse cart makes became obsolete; others such as sawmills and bakeries were no longer economic; and others died with their owners.

In the late 1950's a new approach based on encouraging manufacture for export, repealing the Control of Manufacturers Act which had required majority Irish ownership of industrial enterprises, and on the provision of incentives for foreign firms, which already had established international markets and access to new technologies, to establish in Ireland were introduced. This policy

gradually began to pay dividends. Strokestown today is surrounded by major industrial firms manufacturing for international markets, such as Irish Country Bacon in Rooskey, Leaf Confectionery Manufacturers in Roscommon, and Atlantic Mills in Clondra. In the town itself Manton, a locally owned firm, is a well established manufacturer of refrigerated containers.

In 1948 when I was 12 years of age I left Strokestown to go away to boarding school at Garbally College, Ballinasloe. The after affects of war remained. There was still food rationing, Danish butter tainted by storage, and strong tasting margarine. The restrictions were to go within another year and I was to learn how to cope in a group of 180 other boys drawn mainly from Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim, as well as from my native Roscommon.

Since the 1940's Ireland has become a modern industrial nation. I was privileged to have the opportunity of growing up in a small town in rural Ireland in an era of self-sufficiency and mutual dependence. The political, economic and social conditions today dominated by instant communications, and the breaking down of trading and cultural barriers all over Europe seems a long way removed from the self-contained, though less prosperous conditions of four decades ago.

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