In History and Education, from the Munster Blackwater to the Indian Ocean

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An Autoethnography

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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I Dedicate This Book To

Peg Hanafin (RIP)

For Friendship, Hospitality, and Constant Encouragement
To Write It

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book adopts an autoethnography approach in providing an exposition on my education autobiography. While writing it I recalled the words of Richard White in *Remembering Ahanagran* that many of us live with our stories and those of our families, but we do not think about them very often. For decades my experience has been the exact opposite. In other words, I think about my life stories regularly. Over the last 30 years I also wrote about some of them from time to time, prompted by my two daughters, Déirdre and Sinéad, who in their late teenage years began to ask why we had lived in a number of places before finally settling down in Perth in Western Australia. Later I elaborated for my grandchildren who, following various periods on vacation in Ireland became increasingly curious about their family background. The fact that by then schooling was a large part of their lives provided me with a starting point in addressing their questions. Accordingly, indicating that from the first day I attended school at three-and-a-half years of age to the present I never ceased to be involved in education was meaningful to them. I added that over that period I passed from being a school pupil, to be an undergraduate student, a schoolteacher, a postgraduate research student, and eventually a university academic working in faculties of 'education studies.'

I became particularly aware while documenting my memories that the education currents through which I flowed during my life were part of larger ones moving along not only through Ireland but across many lands. Later, what struck me was that my simple enough life as a professional had been lived within a complicated and changing education world that might be of interest to others. I saw also how drawing on various historical analyses I conducted in previous years while engaging in my reflections could help me to understand how I have been located between history and memory. At the same time, I did not attempt to produce a total account of self along the lines of classic works like that of Znaniecki and White's, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Instead, I concentrated very much on my formal and informal education. In addition, I maintained an acute awareness that while planned instruction provides one with an education, so

also do the informal, unexpected and unplanned activities that take place during one's life.

Most significant for me was that my years of formal schooling coincided with the heyday of the 'triumphalist Catholic Church' in Ireland when the controlling eyes of Catholic clerics were everywhere. Schools constituted one sphere where the degree of associated supervision was enormous. Moreover, members of the public service in Ireland's national Department of Education who oversaw primary, secondary, and technical school education throughout the nation were, by-and-large, loyal conservative Catholics. As a result, they had no desire to threaten the dominance that the Catholic Church (the Church) had achieved in the provision of schooling for Ireland's Catholic population from the time of my great grandparents. Furthermore, that dominance had intensified in newly Independent Ireland as Church personnel became centrally involved in the development of curricula for primary and secondary schools, thus ensuring they had a strong religious ethos.

Primary school teachers also sought to develop their students' numeracy and literacy skills in both the English and Irish language. The focus in secondary schools, that up until 1967 charged fees and were only for a minority who completed primary schooling, was on providing a general academic education but with the emphasis being on rote memory work and the development of lower-level cognitive skills. The schools' authorities at both levels and in the less-developed technical school sector also placed great emphasis on nation building through promoting the learning of the Irish language and Irish history, geography, and various cultural traditions.

In pointing to the matters outlined above I am not paving the way to reveal that I harbour animosity towards those who inducted me into the habitual ways of thinking and acting that circulated within the Irish culture and schooling of my youth. Like most of my peers I knew nothing else at the time. Furthermore, I do not regret that I grew up when I did and that I attended school before so much changed, including in the teaching force due to the rapid demise of priests, brothers and nuns throughout the land. I have also been able to relate to the changes in question in a very personal manner because of the influence those personnel had on me. Indeed, a consciousness of that influence provided me with an additional stimulus to write what is in the chapters that follow.

To summarise so far then, I hold that this work is the product of a force that brought me to see my formal and informal education throughout my life as intimately connected to a set of relationships amongst a multitude that I experienced over time and in different places. I did not set out to

compose it as an autobiography written in a literary style like that which shaped *The Village of Longing* by George O'Brien from my home town of Lismore, County Waterford, who for many years was Professor of English Literature at Georgetown University in Washington DC. In addition, I do not claim to have produced an academic's autobiography on a par with that of Seymour Sarason, the famous American psychologist. I hope, however, that what I present is an account that may be illuminative for those interested in a variety of developments in education in Ireland and internationally over the last 70 years and how those in turn can be viewed in relation to associated changes over a longer time-scale. Simultaneously, I sought to illustrate how one can come to understand oneself as located between memory and history in relation to such developments and changes.

The ideas of the English educationist Peter Abbs that he first expressed in the early 1970s also influenced me. He argued that the central concern of all autobiography should be to describe, evoke and try to recreate the development of the author's experience. Because I embraced that view and the associated one that education cannot meaningfully take place outside of the assenting individual, I informed myself on the approach of auto-ethnographers who hold that one can draw upon one's knowledge of history and of a variety of social science concepts to answer the following conscious or half-conscious questions that are central to any autobiography: Who am I? How have I become who I am? What may I become in the future?

My experiences as a professional historian also provided me with stimulation to write this work. Most of my scholarly work has been in the field of social history, and especially social history of education focused very much on the world of 'ordinary' people rather than privileged elites, and on everyday things rather than sensational events. When faced over the last 40 years with an absence of documented reminiscences while writing various related academic papers I drew on the only source available to me, namely, my own recollections. Those included memories of my classroom experiences when I was in school, my activity as an altar boy, my witnessing of station masses in households in rural areas, and the annual practice of priests in churches calling aloud from pulpits the amount of money paid for their upkeep by individuals in the parish. While expressing great interest in my narratives, reviewers of the papers in question were at the same time often uncomfortable with recommending publication since I had no other sources to support my assertions. While I never had an issue with their decisions, I did come to feel that if I produced a work such as this one it might stimulate others to do likewise and lead to the emergence of a body

of similar testimony that social historians of education could draw from in the future to illuminate their work.

The basic narrative I present commences with an account of growing up in Lismore and of attending schools there run by the Presentation Sisters and the Irish Christian Brothers. Following that, I studied for four years for my undergraduate degree, initially in England and later in Limerick, supported by an Irish government scholarship. I spent much of the next 13 years teaching in secondary schools. My first job was a one-year appointment in Dublin in 1975. I then moved to take up another one-year position, teaching each morning at an all-boys' Christian Brothers' Secondary School in Lismore and every afternoon at the co-educational St. Ann's Secondary School in nearby Cappoquin. The following year I commenced teaching in a full-time position at St. Ann's. Apart from various periods when I was granted leave of absence by my employers to study for postgraduate degrees at Trinity College Dublin and at University College Dublin, I stayed there until 1989.

In June 1989 I moved to Papua New Guinea (PNG) with my wife, Margaret, and Sinéad and Déirdre who then were aged four and six years of age respectively. My position there was as a lecturer in education studies at a teacher training college. The original plan was to stay for just one year and then to return to Ireland. However, we extended our stay by a year. Migration to Australia followed. Initially, I returned to secondary-school teaching for six months before taking up a lectureship at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. At the end of one year there I moved to The University of Western Australia in Perth, where I have worked ever since. Concurrently, I lectured extensively in Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaysia, and engaged in extensive research projects that required travel to Mozambique, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Chile.

The rest of this book is an exposition on my education stories in relation to the key stages of my life detailed above. In keeping with my desire to keep it at the level of the personal, as evidenced in particular by my extensive use of the first person singular throughout as opposed to the impersonal style I usually use when writing an academic treatise, I have not referenced any of my published works within the main body of the text. At the same time, colleagues deemed that my exposition could only be meaningful if I outlined them in an appendix at the end. Moreover, when I considered all of them during my initial examination of my life in history and in education that led to the writing of this book, I concluded that 1953, the year of my birth, had been, to borrow from the title of the autobiography of my favourite novelist, David Lodge, quite a good time for me to be born.

PART ONE:

LISMORE OF MY YOUTH

CHAPTER 2

LISMORE CASTLE

I was born in Lismore, County Waterford on 14 June 1953. For as long as I can recall, my parents told me that the event took place very early in the morning. That same day I was baptised after 11.00am Mass in the local Church of St. Carthage, along with Evelyn Walsh from New Street who had been born a few days earlier. I never received an explanation for the haste in my case. Perhaps it was that baptisms only took place on Sundays and it was easier to get on with it rather than wait for a week. Or maybe it was because I was dragged into the world by forceps, as my mother told me when I was an adult, and that there was some fear my immortal soul would be in danger if I did not 'make it'!

Like my five younger siblings, I was born at home in our house at 20 Parks' Road, with Nurse Nolan, our neighbour and local midwife, assisting my mother. That meant that we were, quite literally, born in the shadow of the first primary school we all attended, that of the Presentation Sisters. The Duke of Devonshire, who was the local landlord during the heyday of British rule in Ireland, paid for the building that was the nuns' very imposing convent situated on the eastern edge of the town. As part of their endeavours within the education complex that sat alongside it, they ran a primary school and a secondary day school for girls. By the time I came to enrol there at three-and-a-half years of age, I was aware of the existence not only of those schools, but also of a host of other features amidst the local built environment. Of those, the focal point was the imposing structure of Lismore Castle.

From a very young age, Lismore to me was associated with Lismore Castle and its immediate surrounds. Soon I could not but notice the great edifice of the Cavendish family headed by the Duke of Devonshire, since nearly every second journey we made out of town required that we witness it on our way to Cappoquin and on to Dungarvan as we crossed over the bridge spanning the River Blackwater that was immortalized by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queen*. Other times we crossed the same bridge on our trips farther afield, occasionally to Waterford City or over The Vee and into Clogheen in County Tipperary, but more usually to the nearby Lismore townlands of Shrough, Cooladrisog and Glauntane.

The physical presence of The Castle is magnetic. Situated on a cliff high above the water level on the southern bank of the river, it reaches straight up to the sky for all to view. Following the advent of *Telefís Éireann*, the national television station, in 1960, I came to see it as being like something out of a Walt Disney movie, especially when we stopped to gaze at it while taking regular walks in its vicinity.

Our elders found the presence of The Castle to be a useful stimulant for drawing our attention to historical events associated with it so that we would be educated through facts and folklore on the origins and development of what we witnessed all around us daily. For one thing, it was impressed on us that in the 7th century, and long before the original constructors built even one tower, a Christian monastery was established on the site and functioned as a place of prayer and learning until the Vikings came and destroyed it. Somewhere in the narrative was a rather confused account of both 'the Book of Lismore' and 'the Lismore crozier'. The former, also known as *The Book of Mac Cárthaigh Ríabhach*, is a late 15th century manuscript containing a selection of religious and secular texts written entirely in Irish. For centuries, the Cavendish family held it safely in Chatsworth House on their Derbyshire estate in England, before handing it over to University College Cork in 2020. A greater mystery surrounded the other great artefact, the crozier that dates from medieval times. Other than the fact that workers found it early in the 19th century in a blocked-up doorway in The Castle, nobody seemed to know much about it.

A huge treat when we were in primary school was an educational visit to Dublin, the climax being when we spent time just gazing at the crozier in the National Museum. Somehow that generated within us a notion that we belonged to a special place. Furthermore, it was impressed that we should take pride in the name 'Lismore' being in the title of our Catholic diocese, the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore; our sense of being from a distinct place was emphasized once again by pointing out to us that before the conjoining took place in 1363, the original separate Diocese of Lismore occupied a far greater land mass than the Diocese of Waterford.

As children we became intrigued each time we stood on the large bridge underneath the Castle and faced west, looking upriver and staring down on the floodplain or inch field. The sight that presented itself, as it still does today, was that of an L-shaped low dyke. During winter in the three decades before Irish independence and for a short time afterwards, water was steered into the field from the River Owneshad that flows parallel to the River Blackwater. The purpose was to flood the portion of the field between the dyke and the road that was between the two rivers. The water then turned to ice that was later cut up and stored nearby in icehouses. Those

were round buildings made of thick stone and they descended underground from the land surface to a depth of about 30 feet.

The ice was withdrawn from the icehouses when it was required as packing to be placed around salmon that sat in boxes after fishermen employed by the Duke of Devonshire caught them in the River Blackwater. Those containers were then loaded up at evening time for export to London on the 6.00pm train that ran on the railway line from Mallow, through Lismore, and on to Rosslare, where local workers lifted them on to the ferry heading for Fishguard in South West Wales. On arrival at the UK port, another group loaded them on to another train that transported them to Billingsgate Fish Market in London, where they arrived at 6.00am. That activity has long since ceased and the Mallow-to-Rosslare trains are gone, but walkers and cyclists regularly travel on a portion of the railway line that now constitutes the Waterford Greenway Walking-and-Cycling Path. The Castle, though, stands as tall and as fortified in appearance as ever.

In its heyday during the middle of the 19th century, the Lismore Estate that was administered from offices in The Castle, consisted of over 80,000 acres located in three principal locations. The major portion, with occasional breaks, radiated out from Lismore as far as Dungarvan in the east and Youghal in the west. Another portion centred on the town of Bandon, gateway to West Cork, while the smallest portion was centred on the village of New Inn in South Tipperary.

Growing up, I knew that my grandmother's house in Chapel Street was 'a Castle house', one of many for which people paid a very low rent. Sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, the Duke sold them all, primarily to those who lived in them, for very small amounts of money. It had become too expensive for 'the Castle' to continue to maintain them. The town of Tallow, five miles to the west, had met a similar fate over 50 years previously when the Duke sold it in its entirety to Dr Waters, Harley Street surgeon and originally from the village of Ahearne just over the border in County Cork.

In my youth we all knew quite a lot of people who worked on the estate and we regularly saw Mr. Silcock, 'the estate agent', driving by on his daily journey from his home in Clonmel. The workers included the fishermen, along with butlers, kitchen staff, housekeepers, gardeners, farm labourers, and men who worked in the woods, cutting and drawing out timber for the sawmill in the estate work-yard. Today, the Duke still owns two-thirds of the fishing rights on the 18-mile stretch of water on the River Blackwater from Youghal to Cappoquin and on the full stretch from Cappoquin to Lismore. Historically, local people who wanted to make a living as independent fishermen or just to fish for recreation were obliged, as they still are, to purchase an annual permit to operate both in Youghal

Harbour and on the Duke's stretches of the river. While relations have always been cordial on the matter, the Duke has at times felt obliged to defend his legal rights in court and has always been successful in doing so.

Up to the mid-1960s, and notwithstanding the fact that by then Ireland had been an independent nation since 1922, the Duke felt so confident and comfortable in Lismore that each time he visited on vacation he flew the family flag from the top of the main tower. That practice came to an end in the late 1960s when various activist groups carried out a protest to reinforce their argument that anyone who wished to go fishing on the river should be able to do so at any time and at no expense. To make the case, members headed for the banks of the river where they partook in 'a fish-in'. Some made speeches and I, like many of my peers, listened with great interest. I remember much rhetoric about land and river ownership, though I have no memory of there being any attention given to who would continue to stock the river with salmon if a new order prevailed.

In similar vein, I heard many a local farmer complain that it was not right that the Duke of Devonshire should own so much land. One day I decided to respond to one of them, telling him I had deduced his motivation was not that of one committed to a socialist utopia (as I may have been at the time) where everything would belong to all. I went on to point out that if someone like himself acquired the estate, he would then exclude us from playing hurling and football on the Gaelic Athletic Association's pitch, from playing cricket on the cricket pitch, from playing soccer on the soccer pitch, and from playing golf on the local golf course. I reminded him that those facilities were available, as many of them still are today, because of low rent charged by Lismore Estates Ltd. I asked him also in rhetorical fashion if, should he own the estate, he would be willing to allow the local point-to-point races to take place on the land and suggested that he would probably fence off the many walks, including those along the banks of the river that we enjoyed without interference from the Duke. In making my point, I was not expressing a desire for a feudal existence. Rather I was indicating to my acquaintance that his problem was that his real desire was to become the Duke of Devonshire himself.

To return now to the matter of a flag flying from the main tower of the Castle; I did not see one for decades following the 'fish-in'. Then one day, in 2008, while driving home from Dublin Airport having just arrived on vacation from Australia, I turned my car onto the main bridge. I became startled on seeing before me a flag flying from on high once again. This time, though, it was not the Cavendish's heraldic flag. Rather, the blue-and-white flag of the County Waterford Gaelic Athletic Association's senior hurling team was blowing in the wind to indicate support for the team

members who were preparing to play Kilkenny in the All-Ireland championship in Croke Park in Dublin.

Socially, of course, as well as politically, economically and religion wise, we were as far removed from the life led by the members of the Cavendish family as one can imagine. Nevertheless, the scale of the environment and the sparseness of the population were such that one could not but be aware of the comings-and-goings of themselves and their peers. An unintended outcome was an extension of the horizons of our world as we pursued our inquisitive capacities regarding those we witnessed. We all knew that Kathleen Kennedy, sister of John F. Kennedy, had become the Marchioness of Hartington when she married the Marques of Hartington, heir apparent to the 10th Duke of Devonshire. Every time she was in residence at The Castle, she attended Sunday Mass in our local church and sat with the members of the congregation, much to their delight.

My school pals and I regularly saw Fred Astaire walking in the area and on two occasions I was a caddy for him when he was playing golf on the local golf course. His presence was due to the marriage that had taken place between his sister Adele and Lord Charles Cavendish. We also had a regular stream of tourists stopping in the town and if asked we accompanied them on a walk. On such occasions we never failed to bring them to see the Church of Ireland (Anglican) cathedral and point to the little rectangular slab sitting on the ground outside. Inscribed on it are the words “here lies the infant child of Adele and Charles Cavendish.” Reading them always evoked a sadness, including amongst ourselves. Invariably the visitors also asked if the child had been baptized as a Catholic or an Anglican. That was our cue to quote the words of William Makepeace Thackeray written on a visit to Lismore in 1834 when he stood on the very spot where we stood: “In the old graveyard Protestants and Catholics lie together – that is, not together, for each has a side of the ground where they sleep and, so occupied, do not quarrel. The sun was shining down upon the brilliant grass and I do not think the shadows of the Protestant graves were any longer or shorter than those of the Catholics. Is it the right or left side of the graveyard which is nearest to Heaven. I wonder ! Look, the sun shines upon both alike.”

For many years too in my youth, a car with a French registration plate used to pull up at a house not very far from our home. It took quite a few years for me to work out that that ‘Castle house’ was the summer residence of the chauffeur for Sir Oswald Mosley, the English Fascist leader in the 1930s. Mosley, like the Duke of Devonshire of the day, was married to a Mitford sister, a British celebrity like all of her female siblings. Being unwelcome in England, the Mosley family regularly resided during the

summer months in their very fine house located just outside not-too-distant Fermoy.

Another connection Lismore had with the British aristocracy was related to me by my father when he was in his 89th year. One afternoon we were driving towards Tallow. About a mile outside Lismore he started to call out the names of former occupants of the various houses along the way. As we passed a large two-storey house on the right hand side I interjected to tell him I knew that McGraths used to live there and that I remembered Tom who had played in goal for Lismore, having already won an All-Ireland minor hurling championship with Cork. I also recalled Tom's brother, Jack who had worked on the farm and their sister Jenny, who had been a nurse. "But you have forgotten to mention Kathleen", Daddy interjected. "She was married to Lord Peel." I thought he was imagining things, but I checked it out the next day. He was correct. The happening seemed to have been a real love story, Kathleen having nursed her future husband in England during the Second World War

Then, of course, there were the occupants of the other 'big houses' up and down the River Blackwater whose faces we occasionally glimpsed as they flashed by in their green land rovers. Their lives, however, might as well have been lived thousands of miles away in the Punjab - where, indeed, some of them had been born - so remote were they from ours. That was particularly the case in matters of religion that had a much greater formative influence than 'the Castle' had on my pals and myself.

CHAPTER 3

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

For nearly all in my age group in Lismore when I was growing up, Catholicism dominated our lives. We believed we were members of a Church that went right back to the time of St. Patrick. It was only when I left school and engaged in further studies that I began to contest that understanding and to realise that the nature of pre-Famine Catholicism and of associated religious practices were very different from what we experienced. Concurrently, I found myself motivated to construct an overview of how I was located in relation to the overall development of Catholicism in Ireland, especially since the Great Famine of 1845-49, during which the failure of the potato crop led to the devastation of a huge proportion of the Catholic landless and smallholding' class. By contrast, members of the Catholic and Protestant middle classes who by then were tenant farmers, had managed to add many of the smallholdings to what they already held.

Apart from farming, very few occupations existed at the time to make an income available to the 'average' male to provide sufficiently for a wife and children. One outcome of the situation was a new pattern of annual emigration that kept the numbers of the marginal class below the politically and economically threatening level, at least in the early decades. Another was the cloister; while the Catholic population in Ireland fell by 27 percent between 1861 and 1901, there was an increase of 137 per cent in the number of priests, monks and nuns in the country. Those groups, collectively known as 'the religious', succeeded in transforming the members of the Irish Catholic Church into being obedient to Rome and their members preached the values considered necessary for spiritual survival within the new post-Famine covetous society that developed. Concurrently, the clergy promoted puritanical attitudes to sex. Those served to reconcile to their lot those adult males who did not emigrate and who could not marry or enter religious life.

Overall, throughout the first four decades following the advent of Irish Independence in 1922, the Catholic Church maintained its dominant role in Irish society. A consequence for my generation, as it had been for

our parents and grandparents, was that Catholicism permeated all aspects of our lives. Priests, nuns and brothers reigned over schools, hospitals and many social welfare institutions. So successful were they in their surveillance that even when they were not physically present, an Irish Catholic felt that he or she was still under their supervisory eyes. That situation was part of what people took to be the 'normal' or pre-ordained state of things.

It was not until I became a postgraduate student that I began to realise that Catholics in other countries considered the world-view into which I had been socialized by my family, by my community and by my country as a distinctive one and had termed it *Le Catholicisme du type Irlaindais*. Associated rituals and practices dominated our lives, brought order to our world daily, weekly and annually, and brought us to believe with pride that Ireland was the most Catholic nation in the world. Our schooling, which took place in a single-sex environment from seven years of age onwards, was a major associated influence. Each day that I attended the Christian Brothers' primary school in Lismore the brother teaching us knelt on entering the classroom in the morning and we all recited privately the 'Prayer before School'. Likewise, at the beginning of every hour we stood to say a Hail Mary. The nuns and brothers taught us special prayers too to say at various periods during the religious calendar and during the religious processions when we paraded around the town, walking in lines behind adults carrying tall wooden crosses. Our primary school classrooms had statues of Jesus and holy pictures and little altars to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin. We learned also about the importance of accepting the Church's definition of situations and following its rules and regulations in order to achieve salvation.

Both in primary school and in secondary school our teachers engaged us in rituals of revitalisation intended to renew our religious motivation and values. One of those was the school retreat. That event, generally lasting about three days, involved us immersing ourselves in prayer, religious reflection, spiritual exercises, and the reading of religious works. We experienced also rituals of intensification aimed at recharging us spiritually and learned to view the celibate priestly life in a favourable way. In addition, we studied the lives of the founders of various religious orders and the history of the orders themselves, and we had visitors from time to time who spoke on 'vocations.' Indeed, the Christian Brothers used to give class time to their own 'recruiting agents' who tried their best, albeit in an unpressured manner, to entice us to join their ranks by telling us stories that extolled the virtues of the order.

I have very clear memories of other ways in which a Church-centred perspective on life also entered my consciousness. One was through my

membership of the local boys' branch of the Legion of Mary; there was a separate one for the local girls and we came together once a year at Christmas time for a well-chaperoned party. Frank Duff (1889-1980), a Dublin-based public servant, had established the Legion of Mary movement in Dublin in 1921 and today it has over 13 million members across the world. Our small branch of about twelve young male teenagers met for an hour each Sunday morning in a local hall before the 11.00am parish Mass. Liam Power, who had attended school with my father and had been an outstanding member of Lismore's adult hurling team in the early 1940s, chaired the meetings. He was a jovial man and very kind. He was also a devout member of the town's senior branch of The Legion that, incidentally, had both male and female members.

We prayed at our weekly meetings and listened to a short homily from Liam or from Br. Blake if he came along. We also read passages from the *Legion Handbook*. It occurred to me years afterwards that that is a very unusual publication. In the opening paragraph the author describes the organisation. It is, he says, "an association of Catholics who, with the sanction of the Church and under the powerful leadership of Mary Immaculate, *mediatrix* of all Graces (who is fair as the moon, bright as the sun, and - to Satan and his legionaries - terrible as an army set in battle array), have formed themselves into a Legion". It exists he goes on "for service in the warfare perpetually waged by the Church against the world and its evil powers". Those extracts depict The Legion as a fighting unit, an army of the Blessed Virgin focused on the victory of Mary and the defeat of Satan. The primary means for achieving its objectives according to the *Legion Handbook* is by placing oneself under the guidance and protection of Mary, who will then guarantee her might and her victory in a spiritual battle for souls.

At the time I do not think my peers and I were able to make any sense of that sort of reasoning nor did we try to. I am certain too that a scary or unpleasant atmosphere did not accompany it. On the contrary, my memory of being a member of The Legion is a happy one. It was the nearest thing we had to a boy scouts' troop or a youth club. We also enjoyed an annual day out by the sea at Tramore every summer, followed by an afternoon at the cinema and a great fry-up afterwards in a Waterford City hotel before returning home. At the same time, we were under an obligation to do some good deed every week. All I can remember on that was John Raferty, Michael Walsh, John O'Donnell, Anthony Cahill, Eric Flynn, his brother Donal, and myself, occasionally visiting patients in the local hospital and chatting to them, and collecting holly for old people at Christmas-time to decorate their living rooms. There was never any notion promoted that

maybe we should engage in social action to promote change aimed at addressing injustices in the community. Indeed, the very notion of injustice was not a component part of our 'habitus' except in relation to the folk history we learned based on a view of 'the Irish' and Catholicism as having been oppressed by 'the British' or, more usually, 'the English', for over 800 years.

Another way in which I was drawn more and more into having a Church-centred perspective on life was through being an altar boy or, for those not brought up in 'the faith', a priest's assistant at Mass and at other religious services. My recollection of my experiences in that role equipped me to come to understand later in life how religious practices regularly operated in public to try to reconfirm people in their social positions and to come to accept that their lot was one for which they were predestined. Sometimes the priests oriented the content of the weekly Sunday sermon to that end, clearly believing that the message they preached was in the best interest of their flock. Twice a year during Sunday Mass the sermon was replaced by a reading aloud of the amounts contributed by each member of the parish for the upkeep of the clergy and the parish infrastructure, with the names of those who made the lowest contributions called out at the end.

I also witnessed regular reconfirmation of social class differences in a place where most did not, namely, within the walls of the convent of the local Presentation Sisters. While religious orders recruited girls from all social classes, usually only those who were able to bring a dowry into the convent with them were permitted to become 'choir sisters' and 'train' to become teachers or nurses. Those from poorer homes became 'lay sisters', wore more humble garments, and were restricted to domestic work within the confines of the cloister. In the case of some orders, and certainly in the case of those who were members of the Presentation Order community in Lismore in whose church I regularly 'served' at Mass as an altar boy, their superiors did not even allow them to sit in the Church in the presence of the choir sisters. Rather, they had to remain hidden from view in a dimly lit corridor leading from the sacristy to the main body of the Church. There, as my fellow altar boys and I made our way onto the main altar followed by the priest, we used to pass them as they knelt in prayer.

Occasionally too, I served Mass for priests who had arrived home on holidays from 'the foreign-missions'. They differed from the priests for the diocese, who were prepared in diocesan seminaries under the jurisdiction of the bishops. Because those institutions charged fees, access to them was restricted largely to individuals from the middle classes. Occasionally a sponsor came forward with the necessary finance to pay for students from humble backgrounds, but it was more normal for poorer boys to join one of

the many religious orders located in Ireland since they did not charge fees. After they were ordained, they were usually sent to minister in Britain, America, Africa, Australia or New Zealand, rather than in Ireland. In those other lands many of them promoted their Irish Catholicism through an ecclesiastical model mirroring that which they had experienced at home. Others went on to find an outlet for radical ideas arising out of their own early experiences of being less than well-off, their interpretations of the Gospels, and the injustices they perceived around them. On that, some advocated for social change to their hearts content while posing no threat to the prevailing order back at home in Ireland.

It would at the same time be unfair to conclude on this by not recalling sermons during my altar-boy years in Lismore by two of our curates, Fr. Quealy and Fr. Keating. They clearly felt they had a duty to advocate the promotion of social justice through attempting to transform the world. Fr. Queally, who was originally from Dungarvan, had, I suspect, developed his commitment after spending some time in Nigeria working with a missionary order, while Fr. Keating, who was a driving force behind the development of local credit union branches, was well versed in European Catholic social theory.

More than in any other way, it was through my attendance at station Masses as an altar boy that I came to understand most vividly how clerics, albeit not necessarily consciously, conducted religious practices that acted to try to ensure that one's place in the existing social structures in the Irish countryside was reconfirmed on a regular basis. The diocesan priests were the key players in maintaining the related tradition of dividing the rural parts of a parish into 'station areas.' Every spring and autumn one of them visited one station area where, in a designated house chosen on a basis of rotation, he heard confessions, celebrated Mass and distributed Holy Communion. I, like other altar boys, went along to give assistance.

The event always opened with attendees attending Confession in a room while I set up the transportable sections of the altar on the kitchen table. Mass followed. When he had finished, the priest disrobed, and I put the religious icons and other accoutrements back into a suitcase where they remained until the following day's 'station'. The priest, sitting down behind the table with notebook and pen placed before him, then started to call out aloud for all to hear the name of each farmer in turn. That was the opening scene of an occasion when one had to pay an additional sum to the clergy to that paid by all through their twice-annual religious dues.

The priest usually commenced the proceedings something like this: "John Kelly, you are farming 80 acres and milking 50 cows. You can certainly pay five pounds." Thus it went on, with the landless people in

attendance - and not because of any rights they held but because of an invitation received from the host - listening attentively as the priest announced to all the wealth or otherwise of each farmer and his place in the social hierarchy. Occasionally a brave soul would attempt discretely to contest the amount sought, but usually that was to no avail.

Each station Mass ended with an impressive breakfast laid on by the host for the priest and the other farmers within the local circuit. The wealthier the farmer the more lavish was the breakfast provided. Individuals sat at the table in the parlour, the best room in the house, taking up positions that accorded with their social status. The most well-off financially sat closest to the priest and to the head of the household, while invited landless labourers and other non-farming neighbours often found themselves eating, albeit heartily, in the kitchen with the women of all classes. As for me, I sat at the head of the table to the left of the priest while the host sat on his right. On a good morning I went home not just with my belly full, but also with a half-a-crown in my trousers' pocket given to me by the host and a packet of biscuits under my arm given to me by his wife.

CHAPTER 4

OLD PARISH AND RING

My memories of living close to the great estate in Lismore where I was born and where I lived for much of my life contrast greatly with my memories of my mother. In thinking about her, I sometimes recall learning *Cúl an Tí* ('The Back of the House') by Séan Ó Ríordáin, when I attended Lismore Christian Brothers' Primary School. In it, the poet says that *Tír na nÓg* (the mythical land of everlasting youth) is to be found by the young in their adventures at *Cúl an Tí*. I had another place in my head from a very young age, however, that had much more mystery attached to it than anything I was learning at school. That place was the Gaeltacht or Irish language-speaking parish of Old Parish (*An Seana Phobal*) that stretches inland from the West Waterford coast and lies between the neighbouring parishes of Ring (*Rinn Ua gCuanach*) and Ardmore (*An Áird Mhór*). The most amazing thing is that I never actually visited Old Parish until 1979, shortly after meeting Margaret, my wife, who hails from there. Yet, when I saw the lighthouse that sits on top of the cliffs at the edge of her family's farm, the sight was very familiar to me. Like much else in the parish, including people both living and dead, along with various sites of historical events, I had a clear image of it in my mind.

It is to the neighbouring and nearer Irish language-speaking parish of Ring, about 18 miles from Lismore that I used to regularly travel with my mother and father when I was young. I used to be wedged in between them on the Lambreta scooter my father had bought when I was only about three years old. I loved those trips, especially when we headed left away from the main Dungarvan-to-Youghal road and took the rising and winding narrow road enclosed by arches of leaf-bearing tree branches as we made for what I knew as Ring Cross. On reaching it, we used to veer right and climb ever steeper on the high road heading for Old Parish, with the sea on our left-hand side widening out to our vision more and more as we progressed. Then, just before we reached the Ring-Old Parish boundary, we used to pull up at the house of my mother's uncle, Tom McGrath, in *Lag na Dháitheadh Síadh*. I remember Tom as being jolly, always smiling, and posing riddles for me. I never grew tired of his company or of the affection of Bridie, his

very *grámhar* (loving) wife. I also recall the speed with which my cousins, Tommy, John and Bernie, used to arrive and then depart as they sought to make the best of the long summer evenings, and that amazing me. The highlight of the evening was when a neighbour, Déaglán Ó Dúbhartaigh, used to come into the house and welcome us to the parish.

Every time we were there my mother used to carry on like she regularly did back at home in Lismore, telling tales about Old Parish, the place that was dearest to her heart and that we understood was located only a few miles farther along the road. A consequence of my listening was that I came to inhabit two worlds. One was that of Lismore that was alive in a concrete way for me in that I could lay my two hands on its buildings, I could see its people with my eyes, and I could hear its sounds with my ears. Alongside in my head was the magical world of Old Parish of my imagination that I came to love in my own childish way.

It is no wonder, of course, that my mother was always talking about Old Parish since that is where she was born, like her father, Paddy Keane, before her. She also lived there until she was 15 years of age. From my limited study of psychology, I have come to realise that one's experiences during those years can be much more formative and can live on in one's memory much longer than anything one experiences later in life. She certainly regularly recalled that her father, originally landless, bought a small farm when he married my grandmother, Ellen McGrath from *Baile Uí Chuirrín* in Ring, who had inherited a smallholding of equally challenging land there from her family. They sold that to her brother Tom, thus acquiring the money to purchase their slightly larger holding in the townland of *Móin Fionn* in a large part of Old Parish known as *Barra na Stuaic* and enabling them to move from their cottage in *Baile na hÁirde*.

In 1939, my grandfather, along with a neighbour, Paddy Allen, made a major decision to leave the area. Due to government policy of the time implemented by the Land Commission of Ireland, they were able to surrender their farms to the State and receive a better farm somewhere else. The two families, along with the Gouldings who came from mountain land in the farthest reaches of Ballysaggart in the Parish of Lismore, and the Tobins from outside Clonmel, moved to Ballymote in the Parish of Kilwatermoy, not far from the town of Tallow.

My understanding is that an old British army officer, a Major Parker, whose family members had resided on the farm in Ballymote for around 150 years as members of the local Protestant sub-gentry, had neglected to work it productively. The State intervened, as it did in similar situations around the country and acquired it through a compulsory purchase order. The Land Commission officials then divided it into four holdings, one for each family.

It had new houses built for the Allens, Gouldings and Tobins, while my grandfather received the large two-storey house of the previous owner because of the number of children in the family: Tom, Maura (my mother), Kathleen, Eileen, Sheila, Bridgit, Nora, Statia, Hannah, Peggy, Christopher, Michael and Agnes. There had been another son, Patrick, the same name as my grandfather, but he died when he was only three months old. His remains lie in one of the two graveyards in Old Parish, but where the grave is located is unknown to me.

I knew my mother's parents reasonably well. It was to their house that my father used to bring my siblings and I each time my mother was about to give birth. We also spent many summer weeks in the house with them. What I remember most was my grandfather shouting to my uncles at the height of his voice early each morning to get up and milk the cows. His roar was always prefaced by a '*t'anam an diabhal*' (upon the soul of the devil). I also remember that he regularly used to talk about his old friend, Willy Walsh (*Liam Mór Breathnach*), who owned a public house in Old Parish and who was a well-known musician. Both commenced at school together, were lifelong friends, and died on the same day.

At evening time when our aunts and uncles had gone their separate ways, we used to listen to our grandparents recalling in Irish those they termed '*na rí sean-daoine*' ('the real old people'). At the time, we had no idea what they were on about, but later in my life I came to understand that their reference was to the monolingual Irish speakers who saw the world through lenses very different from those of the generation that came after them. Because of her age, my mother only spoke of the latter, namely, those who were bilingual and so had one foot in the old world and another in the new one at the time she attended the National School in Old Parish.

Because of my mother's many tales, I created an image of one person above any other. That was Tom Carty who married my grandaunt, Julia Keane. The couple had no family and lived in what I imagined to be a Mediterranean-like environment it was so lovely. I had a picture in my mind of a place well sheltered from the wind because of the trees and bushes growing around their house on all sides. Running through my make-believe little forest was a small road that went past their two-storey house that the pre-Independence authorities had built to accommodate coast guards. I had a vivid picture of that small road, or 'the Lane' as my mother used to call it, that wound its way to *Tráigh Bhaile Mhic Airt* (Ballymacart Strand).

Another image I had was of Tom and Julia making candles out of wax that had washed up on the beach. They used to melt that down, place it in homemade timber moulds, and set a horse's hair through the centre of each piece so that it could act as a wick. They then left it alone until it had