

# Roots *and* Wings

*Paul*



*by*

Sr Alice Lynch C.S.J.P

Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, Ireland.

Published by Dileánach



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*Merry Christmas 1998*



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1997

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# CONTENTS:

I Flew over the Bog-Hole .....	1
There's a Time to be Born...and a Time to Die .....	5
Out of the Darkness... Into the Dawn .....	7
We're on the Rock... Don't Rock the Boat .....	11
The Hay is Hating .....	15
The Sacred...and...the Profane .....	21
Skelligs List 1954 .....	25
The Best Years of My Life .....	27
Dublin's Fair City .....	33
Love is not Love that Alters, when it Alteration Finds .....	37
If all the Year playing holiday.... ..	41
A Time to be Weaned...Pruned...and Groomed .....	45
Get Out! Get Out!....Whoever you are! .....	49
Come to a New Land...which I will show you .....	53
Here I am Lord...ready or not, here I come .....	55
There's Hope for the Flowers .....	61
Into the Wild Blue Yonder...California, Here I come .....	65
Back Home....and Away Again! .....	67

My father, Michael Lynch, was born on Valentia, but my mother Minnie née Murphy was a stranger from the village of Ballycarberry, about fifteen miles away. I was named Alice after my mother's sister, and was the seventh child in a family of nine. For the first half a year of my life I enjoyed the distinction of being the "baby" of the family. My earliest memories are very pleasant ones, of being dressed in my Sunday best, navy velvet dress and white lace pinafore, and accompanying my parents to the "strand" which bordered our land to the south. Between both my parents, with a hand



# I "Flew Over the Bog-Hole"

**M**y roots are deep in the mountainous soil of South Kerry, Ireland. I was born and grew up on an island, not far from the mainland. This island is called Valentia, which is an anglicized version of the Gaelic words, "Beal Innishe". Translated, this means "the island at the mouth" since it is situated at the "mouth" or entrance of the channel of "goleen". Formerly, and in Gaelic it is called Oilean Dairbhre, the Island of the Oaks.

Since 1970, a long-awaited bridge has made the island more accessible, but with the increase in the volume and size of vehicular traffic, tourism does not flourish as it might if the roads could be widened to keep up with the fast moving times. Recently a wonderfully efficient Car-ferry is being operated by a local group, at the end of the island.

When I was growing up, I loved boats, and often bragged that a bridge would ruin our uniqueness as an island, and cause a loss of identity. The gentle, and sometimes not so gentle, rocking of the ferry-boat as we crossed the channel in order to attend the Presentation Secondary School in Caherciveen, was always a rather delightful adventure.

My father, Michael Lynch, was born on Valentia, but my mother Minnie née Murphy, was a "stranger" from the village of Ballycarberry, about fifteen miles away. I was baptized Alice Armina Lynch, and was the seventh child in a family of nine. For the first three and a half years of my life, I enjoyed the distinction of being the "baby" of the family. My earliest memories are very pleasant ones, of being dressed in my Sunday best, navy velvet dress and white lace pinafore, and accompanying my parents to the "strand" which bordered our farm to the south. Between both my parents, with a hand



firmly grasped on either side, I "flew" over the soggy spots which we called "bog-holes". My sister, Eileen or Nell, who was two years older than I, more nimble, stronger, and far more of a tom-boy, would look on with a mixture of jealousy and disdain, as she very independently navigated the area by herself.

On these balmy Sunday evenings, in the warm twilight, as I chatter my way over the marsh-land and the greener pastures to count the livestock, and sit to watch the gentle ebb and flow of the tide, I felt warm and cozy, loved and cherished.

When did it all change? I can't be sure! Possibly, my first branching out into the cold realistic world of growing up, was when a curly, blond, blue-eyed angel, or "monster" (depending on whichever vantage point you were coming from) joined us in the large slate-roofed, whitewashed farmhouse, when I was about four years old. They told me that Mrs. Mawe, the local mid-wife, brought him in her little black bag, but wherever he came from, life was never the same for me after that!

He was called Michael after my father, and "old Mike Lynch", my grandfather. He was worshiped from the very beginning, especially by my father, who, to give him his due, tried to involve me in taking care of him, but it just didn't work! This bawling bundle of humanity usurped my place as "Queen of the Castle" and I did not like that one bit!

To compound matters for the worse, my sister Eileen, who had been my constant, if sometimes bossy, companion for as long as I could remember, now turned school age and joined the older members of the family in going to Ballyhearney School each day. Where was she now when I needed her most? Not only that but she would return each afternoon with her bags, and her books and lord it over me with her constant recitation of poems and things she had learned at school.

I was in the twilight zone, too old to be a baby, and too young to go to school, in a kind of Limbo, ignored, usurped, displaced, cut-off, and very lonely! It was probably at this time that I became very, very shy, hiding under the table when we had guests, and peeking out beneath the tablecloth now and then to make sure I didn't miss too much.

After I reached the age of six, I joined the throng on the two-mile hike to Ballyhearney National School, where I soon learned to read and do my "sums". There were six boys and only one other girl and myself in our class. Catherine and I had a great time, naming our favourite boyfriend of the week, and although I was not yet interested in boyfriends as such, I realized the fact that they vied with one another for our approval and good graces. One of the lads, Paul, was especially nice to me, and continued to be, even when we were both grown up.

Life is like a spiral or sometimes a yo-yo! Just as things were getting better and I was enjoying school, success and companionship, things became worse at home. My paternal grandfather died when I was about five. It was the result of the 1932 flu. It was natural, it was to be expected, he was ninety-three. What was not expected, at least by me, was the of my oldest and gentlest sister, Mary Catherine, and even less expected was the death of my father, six months later.

The day before Mary died, I was on my way home from school with three or four of my friends, when a side-car, (a kind of jaunting-car), passed us on the road. It was ours. The horse was going at a very fast trot, but I recognized my father in his Sunday suit and hat, on the driver's side, and a gentleman in black on the other side. They did not stop to pick us up, and give us a ride home, which should normally have happened, but that didn't disturb me in the least. One of the older girls, Kathleen, was a little more perceptive.



"Who's sick back at your place?" she asked.

"No, there's no one sick", I replied.

"Well, there must be", she said, "because that was the priest with your father".

She was right. The man in black must have been the priest. But no one was sick when we left this morning. There must be some mistake!

"They are going awfully fast". she said. "Someone must be getting the last rites!"

By degrees the truth of what she said was dawning on me, but I refused to believe it. She must be mistaken. She always loved to be one step ahead of me. I decided that this couldn't be so, no one could be dying, everyone was alright that morning. She had suffered since childhood with some form of epilepsy, and could never be left alone. Otherwise, she seemed to me to function quite normally. Later I learned that a doctor had alerted my mother that this could happen, but I had not known about it. These were the days before medication had been found for such illnesses. My mother had taken her to every doctor, faith-healer and Holy Well in the country, but she had not been cured. She died within three days and was buried on May Day, two months before her eighteenth birthday.

## "THERE'S A TIME TO BE BORN . ... AND A TIME TO DIE"

My next most outstanding memory is of being awakened nearly on a Sunday morning in early October. There was an unusual hustle and bustle going on downstairs. Eileen and myself hurried to find out what we were missing. Instead of getting our usual breakfast, we were told to go outside, out of the way. Whatever was going on, my older sister Katie seemed to be in charge of it.

She was filling up a large tub with scalding hot water, and pulling down clean towels and sheets from the top of the press or supply closet.

Neither Mother nor Dadda were in sight. There was an air of excitement as if someone was up to something. At one point I distinctly heard a baby cry, but Eileen told me to be quiet and pray. Katie seemed to be out of her wits with anxiety, and she said that she wished that "they" would come soon, and they did!



Michael Lynch (My father)  
Died in 1993 - aged 54



We heard the side-car arrive and shortly thereafter, my father and Mrs. Mawe got off and ran into the house and up into my parents bedroom. A short time later, Dadda appeared with a little bundle in a blanket, and told us that we had a new baby brother. It was something I had never expected, but no one could tell me that Mrs. Mawe had brought this one in her little black bag. I had heard him cry even before they arrived. Where on earth could he have come from? No one came forward with any explanation. My father was so proud! He kept telling us that the Lord had given us back someone in place of Mary Catherine whom He had taken himself. He was pleased, and now fifty-four years old. He seemed to have a new lease on life, he was jubilant and happy, and he taught me to hold and care for this very dear baby brother. I, too, felt proud and happy because I had at last found something that I was good at. But then it happened again. My father had been called to jury duty in Killarney, about sixty miles away. The journey was by train and he caught cold on the way home on the train. This turned to pneumonia and pleurisy. My mother sent immediately for both the doctor and the nurse. Hot plasters were administered twice a day and there was a nurse around the clock. But my mother was not optimistic. They buoyed her up with false hope, saying that it was hard to tell until what they called "the crisis" had passed. After the anointing and the last rites, my father seemed to rally a little. He had been very distraught at the thought of leaving my mother with eight children between the ages of nineteen years and six weeks. Now after he had received the sacrament of the sick (in those days called Extreme Unction), he asked to make out his will. My mother asked a neighbour to witness the will. At ten p.m. on Saturday night, November 25, 1933, my father died.

My oldest brother John Joe stopped the grandfather clock as some kind of a traditional ritual. It was only then that reality struck, I really did not expect my father to die. I was almost eight years old, and the memory of that night, and its sadness, is still with me, etched in my memory forever.

## OUT OF THE DARKNESS . . . . INTO THE DAWN

After my father's death things deteriorated rapidly at home. My father had been my champion when I complained that it was too cold to go outside to do my chores. He would tease the others into helping me out, saying that the breeze could go in and out through me, as I was small for my age and skinny in those days. Now with Dadda gone, my oldest brother, who was nearly twenty, took over the running of the farm. This was a burden for which he was ill-equipped. Although he wanted to inherit the farm, he did not like farm-work, and would like to have been a gentleman-farmer or overseer. To compound matters, Ireland was, at this time, going through what was known as the "economic war". Part of the treaty with Britain, when we gained our independence, was that we would continue to pay tariff on our land for some years to come. The Irish government decided around 1933 that this was not fair,



Alice (8), Breda (12), Nell (10), Denis (2) and Mick (4) taken around 1934 - 35.



and would not continue. Britain retaliated by closing their market to our products. Hard times began! The price of cattle, sheep and dairy products took a dive. I remember crying for my mother's plight as we watched my brothers come back home from the fair with a herd of cattle for which there had been no buyers in the local town that day. Fortunately, we had plenty of fresh food for our own consumption, but absolutely no money. Young calves were being butchered for their hides, as there was a small market for animal skins at the leather and tanning factories which had been started by our new Irish government.

The family side-car, in which I loved to ride, fell into disrepair. Gone also were the fur-trimmed coats, hats, and warm muffs which my mother had been wont to order from J.D. Williams mailing catalogue. In my father's time we had at least one steady workman and a full-time servant-girl to help with dairy and the milking. Now there was no money and we were all to do more than our share. Neighbours helped during the busy seasons, in exchange for milk, butter and eggs. On the whole it was a very sad time, but we survived!

For me, there was my baby brother Denis. I loved to take care of him. He was a good baby and easy to love. Besides, it eliminated outside farm chores for which I never had a liking. When other members of the family tried to take over my baby-sitting job, I would try to get Denis to cry so that they would have to leave him. Sometimes it even worked! I find it very difficult to understand how older children can find it such an imposition to mind the younger members of the family. With me it had always been a case of "He's not heavy, he's my brother!"

School was still good. I loved to study. I loved to read. Each week, my sister Katie brought home the two magazines, "Our Boys" and "Ireland's Own". These contained ghost-stories, poems, jokes, and traditional songs. On Sunday, after Mass, it

was a kind of ritual, for us younger ones, to gather round my mother's bed, while she rested a little after the two mile hike to Church. She would read to us from the serial-story in the newspaper called The Standard while the dinner was cooking in the kitchen under my older sister's supervision. After the dinner and the wash-up was done, she would take us outside to a grassy knoll, from which we could see the ocean and the surrounding hills. We would sit around on a rug or a blanket and she would draw our attention to the beauty of creation, the grass, the flowers, and the trees, the rugged hills, the shimmering waves in the channel beyond. Life had its moments! I must have been about ten years old when a new boy came to our school and joined our class. He was very good looking and I guess I had a crush on him.

This was the first time that I was emotionally aware and excited about the difference between boys and girls. Before this I had to pretend that I liked boys because all of the other girls were talking about them, but now I didn't have to pretend. I thought he was great! I probably spent my time in class just looking at him. I was far too shy to even speak to him, most of the time. Sometimes, however, he would come to the farm for cream, and I was in seventh heaven.

When I was about eleven years old, my life spiralled upward once more. The attraction between boys and girls became exciting. I was confirmed at the same time as my sister Eileen who was two years older (just because the Bishop came to the island once every three years). I took and passed my Primary Exam, also at the same time my sister took hers (because this was the first time that this exam was given at our school). These events boosted my ego, and I felt good about myself. More and more I was beginning to see myself as a girl who liked boys and who seemed to be attractive to them. I began to brush my hair more often, I let it grow longer, I looked in the mirror every chance I got, and I was beginning to find out about "the birds and the bees". My sister was my main source



and our next door neighbours gave me the spicy tidbits which were not available to our family.

My mother was absolutely against juicy gossip. When someone mentioned at the table that a girl in the neighbourhood, who was not married, was going to have a baby, my mother said, "Now I don't want you talking about this, it could happen to anybody!" That scared me so much that I spent the whole month of summer vacation thinking that I might have a baby because some of the bigger boys had kissed us on the last day of school. I must confess that when the whole procedure was explained to me in more graphic detail, I was more repulsed than attracted, at least for a long while yet.

Our teacher, Mr. Griffin, very excellently taught us older girls the rudiments of algebra, literature, and poetry. When I was thirteen, he gave me *A Tale of Two Cities* to read during the summer vacation. Of course I skipped the descriptive parts and got straight to the basic threads of romance. I cried copiously for Lucy and Charles (at least I think those were the names of the main protagonists) and had the book finished in two weeks. Up until this time I had survived on a steady diet of folklore, ghost stories and serial stories from weekly newspapers and magazines. We had no library on the island. After this the teacher introduced me to some of the simpler classics and to Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. It was heaven; I read every chance I could get.

## **"WE'RE ON THE ROCK . . . . DON'T ROCK THE BOAT!"**

I remember one rather traumatic experience which occurred when I was ten or eleven years old. I call it my "near-death experience!"

My memory is of a calm and balmy evening, probably in late August. The sun was a red ball of fire, sliding silently into Dingle Bay. "Aha!" we thought, "a red sky at night is a shepherd's delight!"

We were returning by ferry-boat from the Caherciveen Regatta. This was an annual event, usually one of the last, big boat-racing competitions of the summer.

It is my recollection that we must have done very well, as the level of rejoicing and jubilation was high. We had probably beaten the "town" oarsmen in the seine-boat race, and that for we Valentia Islanders, comes next to the Good News of the Gospel, to this very day! We were elated, proud and extremely full of the old "joie de vivre".

It was Tommy Higgins ferry-boat, with Nandy as our captain. One of his younger cousins was at the helm. We may have been a whit over-crowded but on a calm evening with the gentle waters of "Goleen Dairbre" rippling around us, this was not a cause for undue consternation.

We were mostly the very young, warned by our parents that we would never go out again, unless we were home before dark, blending in with older-adults who were in a hurry home to do their milking. All the "young people" were still back in Caherciveen, waiting for the pubs to close and the dance-halls



to open. Fitz's or Boss Walshe's would be packed, depending on which dance-hall had been lucky enough to have booked Delahunty's famous band. The music and the dancing and that stuff they sell in bars, would "fill up their senses" until the wee hours of the morning.

A little while after we had left the Caherciveen pier behind, someone shouted "Where's the music?" and one of the men, possibly Padgene, pulled out a mouth-organ and started up a lively tune. Feet began to time with the music until Nandy shouted; "For God's sake, don't rock the boat! There are too many people on board. Have some common sense now, will ye?" The music took on a slower tempo, and one of the older ladies, probably Bea O'Connor, lead us in the "Rose of Tralee". We all joined in, on whatever key or pitch "came naturally". My sister, Breda, and myself luxuriated in the warm motherly attention we were receiving from some of the kindly neighbours who remembered that we didn't have a dad.

Suddenly there was a rumbling among the men, and we guessed that something was amiss. Nandy shouted, "Quiet!" The singing stopped and we could hear a low grating sound which, to our untrained ears, didn't seem too ominous or life-threatening, until someone shouted, "My God, we're on the rocks!" And on the rocks, we were!

The man at the helm had inadvertently steered the boat a little too near the Renard shore where some dangerous rocks were hidden by the full-tide. Nandy hoped that he could ride the boat off the rock, but more experienced voices shouted, "Shut off the . . . engine!" and he did.

The seriousness of the situation was lost on myself until Breda explained it to me later. While the tide was full, and there was plenty water to float the boat, we were relatively safe, but when the tide began to ebb, the boat could no longer float and would turn over and trap us underneath it. Few were able to swim.

One seasoned swimmer thought he could make it to the mainland where he could seek help, but the others held him back, they were aware of some dangerously deep holes between ourselves and the safety of the shore.

The men began to whistle, and call for help. The women began the Rosary. We said the Act of Contrition and the memorare to our Lady and every prayer we knew, some in Gaelic . . . in case that God was an Irishman and could understand us better in our own language! The channel was calm as a lake. The moon came up behind the sand-dunes of Beginniss Island, but there we stand or stood, first on one leg and then on the other, and we waited and waited! Surely someone from the mainland would hear us! Then we remembered the Regatta and knew that most of the Renard crowd would still be back in the town, post-morteming the races. Valentia was still too far away, but there were still a few men living on Begennis. Maybe they would hear us!

Finally we saw a tiny light in the distance! It could belong to a farm-house or to a fishing boat moored in the harbor ! It seemed to be moving! Dare we hope? Yes, it was growing larger! Praise the Lord! As it approached, the men were identified as Casey and Connell from Beginniss. Their boat was small, but it was there, and we welcomed them with joy, and gratitude. It was decided that, in the interests of time, the passengers from our ferry-boat would be transported in small groups to a larger trawler moored in the harbor, and later taken to Valentia. This worked out well. It was decreed by Nandy that women and children would be the first to be rescued. This was fine with us, and in less than an hour we were safely deposited on the Knightstown pier, knowing that although the last passengers had witnessed the ferry-boat keel over before their eyes, all were safely rescued. Praise the Lord! My sister Katie who, with my mother, took the responsibility for the milking and dairy chores on days such as this, was therefore unable to attend the Regatta. What a welcome sight



she and her boyfriend Johnie were, as they met us on the pier and took us on their bicycles back to Coromore.

This adventure may not qualify as a "near-death experience" in the current jargon of today, but it was close enough to death to make it an unforgettable one!

## "THE HAY IS HATING"

My mother was always the first up in our house, and it was her thankless task to rouse the rest of us. One by one, we rose from beneath the blankets at an individual speed of slow, slower and barely moving.

On one particular morning, in late August or early September, however, the call to mobility must have been more potent than usual. Even John responded with unprecedented alacrity! There was a general exodus towards the haggard where mother was gesticulating wildly in the direction of the recently installed hay-reek.

Sure enough, even as I watched, tremendous clouds of steam were emitting from this huge hay structure. Something was definitely wrong, but what? When the general mayhem of blaming and complaining wore itself out, and some facsimile of reason restored, we were all told to grab a pike, or hay-fork. When I found one, I had no idea what to do with it. Luckily someone relieved me of this burden by telling me to run as fast as I could, back the road, to get outside help. "What should I tell them?" I asked. "Sure, tell them the hay is hating, and to come at once and bring a pike!" I was told.



*My sister Katie with her husband Con Lyne take a trip on the horse and trap in 1964 with their children Patrick, Nealie and Mary Ann*



So off I went, repeating the message, so that I wouldn't get it wrong. I called the Burnses, Mike (Known as Gaffney), Tim (called Busty) and Gaffney's son, John Burns. I also called Maurice Connor (known as Neighbor), the Cahill twins, Jack and Mick, and possibly Johnny McCarthy Coromore. They all seemed to understand the predicament, and passed me out on the way home.

On my return to the haggard, I found that my brothers had removed the heavy canvas covering from the top of the reek and members of the work-force were frantically pitching the hay on to the ground where others were rapidly strewing and spreading it all over the haggard. For some reason the hay structure was being demolished with all possible speed. It sure seemed like a crisis situation! But why?

There was no school for anyone that day. My brother, Mehaul was possibly the only one who appreciated this turn of events. He loved anything to do with the farm and probably did a man's job that day.

I was sent to Mrs. Driscolls, Chapeltown, for fresh supplies of 'shop-bread' and jam, and spent the rest of the day helping to make sandwiches for the workers.

All day long, the hay was shaken out and tossed about the haggard, until in the afternoon it was deemed ready to be gathered back into smaller stacks where it could still under go some seasoning without being damaged by the rain. By nine or ten o'clock that night, some semblance of peace, sanity and well-being was restored to our house.

So what had caused all this stress and fuss, and extra work for everyone? Well, in those days, hay, being the principal fodder for the animals during the winter, had to undergo a rather elaborate process called "saving", a rather mystical and mystifying term to say the least!

When the tall mellow grass had turned a medium shade of yellow, the mowing machine cut it into long swaths. The next day, a tumbler or "tosser" was used so that the reverse side of the hay would receive its share of sun and "weather" (mostly "weather" in our part of the country!). After a day or so, it was raked into clusters and made into low cone-shaped piles, called "grass-cocks", or if the weather had been favourable it was made into larger mounds, called "pike-cocks". In a week or so it was ready for the next stage when the smaller cocks could be drawn together in groups of five or six and made into "winds" or meadow-cocks.

This latter step could be serious business. At least two expert hay-makers were required. A circular base or foundation was formed and filled with hay until it reached a few feet in height. Then one of the workers stood in the middle of this mound from which point of vantage he would receive, position, pack and trample the hay, while moulding it into the acceptable beehive structure which was considered the norm. It was the task of the second worker to carefully and strategically feed the hay, with the aid of a hay-fork, into the arms of the packer, making sure that the amount of hay was just right and that it could be from an angle acceptable to the "middle" man. Needless to say I never qualified for either position, but Eileen did and was in high demand during the school holidays and the hay-making season.

In the evening these hay-cocks were trimmed around the base. They were then tied down on all sides by rope called súgán, to the ends of which large stones were attached.

When all the meadows were thus "saved" a day was projected for the operation or event known as "putting in the hay". This required major preparation and planning. It involved the young and the old, male and female, animal and mineral! In the haggard, a large rectangular foundation was prepared at the site chosen for the hay-reek. It was lined with wood and



straw sod and stones. Large quantities of súgán and heavy rope, canvas bagging, and large stones were carefully chosen and accumulated. The most experienced and reliable hay-makers in the townland were canvassed, cajoled or collared, novenas were added to trimmings of the Rosary for good weather. Farm carts and hay-waggon were checked for harness and other equipment.

Inside the farm-house extra female help was enlisted. There was cleaning and scrubbing, roasting and baking to be done. Large platters and dishes, used only for occasions such as this, were taken down from the top of the "dresser" or china closet. Cups mugs, saucers and plates, knives, forks and spoons were washed, scoured, scrubbed or polished. Plenty dry turf or peat was selected, bagged and ready close by. Sufficient tea, milk, sugar, butter, jam and barn-brack was stored in the cupboard. Last but not least, quantities of porter, Guinness, lemonade and sometimes wine was ordered from the pub.

When the great day arrived, the "putting in" began no later than 8 a.m. The carts and wagons with their drivers and pikers were assigned different meadows from which to collect the hay, while ten or twelve of the ace hay-makers, stripped off to the waist, put last minute touches to the foundation and waited for the hay to arrive. Throughout the day, the hay was drawn, pitched, spread out, trampled and packed to a degree of density which would allow it to breathe, and settle into a sound, healthy, sweet-smelling fodder, which could be cut into chucks whenever fodder was needed.

The noon-day meal was not a heavy or lengthy affair, and the afternoon snack even less so. Not until the last load of hay was packed, and the reek was rounded off, covered and securely tied down, and all the experts had given their "say", and the horses fed and put out to grass, did the celebrations begin.

Now there was lashings of ham and roast lamb, potatoes and vegetables, with blackberry, rhubarb and apple tarts for

dessert, and tall glasses of porter or Guinness for the men, and tea, lemonade or wine for the women and children.

Then everyone was relaxed and happy. Tongues were loosed, jokes were told, yarns were spun, and ghost-stories recalled with due exaggeration. Song and recitations were called for. "The Cremation of Sam Magee", "The Croppy Boy", "Big Tim Came Home From Yankee Land", and "Kevin Barry", "The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door", and "She Lived Beside the Anner" and "Noreen Bawn" were belted out or softly crooned. The gramophone would be brought out and a half-set and the "Stack of Barley" would be danced by those willing and able. Politics were discussed and the problems of the world solved. It is only recently that I have begun to realise that this type of celebration was a remnant of the old pre-Christian Lughnasa, thanksgiving for the harvest celebrations, practiced by our ancestors. We weren't big into origins, in those days, and I think we were sometimes led to believe that we should be ashamed rather than proud of our ancestors.

After my father died and the Economic War with England impoverished us considerably, the harvest celebrations became but a pale spectre of their former selves. However, during the past few decades, as the economy and the harvesting devices improved, and the "putting in the silage" took the place of "putting in the hay" I am happy to see that some celebrative aspects of these events have been received. My nieces, Mary, Ann, Pat and Una, in their respective farming households, prepare for and try to celebrate the larger silage events with the same enthusiasm and gusto as I remember from the earlier days.

In Killorglin, Puck-Fair is still celebrated as a harvest event, but some of the traditional "pattern, show and fair" celebrations have died out, some because of excessive violence and inappropriate behaviour allowed at these gatherings, some because of snobbery and Jansenism, and



some because, through a lack of knowledge of their origins we allowed them to be dubbed as superstition, without recognizing their importance as part of our inheritance of true Celtic Creation Spirituality. I wonder if G.K. Chesterton would be inspired to comment on our gatherings today as he did earlier in the century, when he wrote:

Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine  
There will be laughter, and good red wine,  
At least I have always found it so,  
Benedicamus Domino!

The "Benedicamus Domino!" is key here, but we need to keep our focus on it. The harvest festivals originated with our ancestors, in an effort to show gratitude to Lughnasa, the only God they knew. Can we do less than show some gratitude to the Christian God whom we have come to know and love? Is it not fitting to join with friends and neighbors in an exuberance of joy, gratitude and wholesome camaraderie, at least once a year, while we can still feel the "sweet aroma" of these gifts we have just gathered into our barns?

## THE "SACRED" . . . . . AND . . . . . . . THE "PROFANE".

The commodity known as the "Skelligs List" seems to have been a feature completely unique to our part of South Kerry. I will try to explain its origins, use, and importance to our cultural development, as best I can.

The Rock, known as Skelligs Rock, rises out of the Atlantic Ocean, about twelve miles west of Valentia. It had become famous during Ireland's Golden Age when the monks established thereon, a monastery which probably lasted until the time of Cromwell.

All that is left today are some spectacular beehive huts, and a small lighthouse, where, until recently, official lightkeepers operated, rotating on a monthly basis, in order to alert foreign ships of the dangers of its existence. I believe that today, timers, operated from the main-land of Valentia, are used instead.

Historians tell us that in 664 A.D. when "Ora et Labora", a strict regime of Work and Prayer, was still the monastic fare, the date for the celebration of Easter, (which had long been causing friction between the Celtic and the Roman Church) was finally settled at the Synod of Whitby. At this time it was decreed that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday, after the first full-moon, after the Spring Equinox. Means of communication being as they were in those days, this new and contentious piece of information did not reach the West Coast of Ireland until some months later, and Skelligs being even further west, the monks were literally the "last to know!" Consequently, it could be assumed that, without any fault of theirs, they continued to celebrate Easter at a later date. The



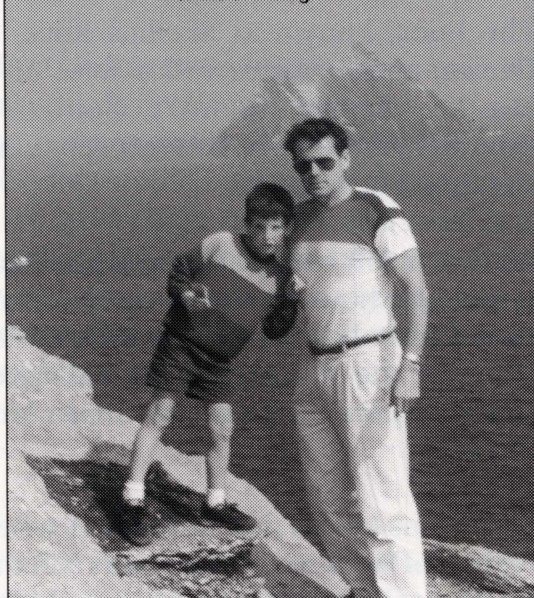
importance of this decision and its effect on the Irish Christian Church was not so much in connection with the celebration of Easter, as it was with the date of Shrove Tuesday. As many may remember, before Vatican Council II, the sacrament of Matrimony could not be celebrated during the Holy Season of Lent. If you were not married by the Mardi Gras, sometimes known as "Pancake Tuesday" you had to wait until after Easter.

Always ready to find loop-holes from the strict "letter of the law" and quick to latch on to the bizarre and the whimsical, some wag or gag, poet or seer from our South Kerry area, decided to build a legend around this historical aberration. It was assumed and proposed that since Shrove Tuesday

occurred at a later date on the Skelligs than on the main-land, then couples who may have inadvertently "over-shot" the date or slept through their own marriage ceremony . . . or . . . for whatever reason failed to tie the knot before Lent, said couples could now hop a boat for Skelligs where they could be validly united in good standing.

This legend gave rise to the compilation of a list which tried valiantly to match up unmarried lads and lassies who were eligible, and some "over-eligible" for matrimony. Not unlike "The Fiddler On the Roof" this list had a certain match-making device, giving "hot-tips" to those who may have

*My nephew Micheál Lyne on a trip to the Skelligs with his son, Gearóid in 1992. Unfortunately Gearóid was diagnosed with Cancer 3 years later and died within 2 months at the age of 11.*



lacked the courage or the imagination to find a soul-mate on their own. Usually couples who were "going steady" led the list, but after that, things could go from the sublime to the ridiculous. Grey-haired pensioners bent in two by the weight of years and arthritis, could be paired up with apple-cheeked penniless lassies, and returned "yanks" were named in connection with good-looking maiden-ladies who "still had hopes".

The List was based on the adage that marriages were made in heaven, that there's someone "out there" for everyone, and that "for every old shoe, there's an old stocking". Some marriages may have resulted, but the main purpose of the List was that the incongruity of some of the suggestions would give us a good laugh!

I believe that the List was sometimes disclosed at a Mardi Gras house-party or gathering. The author or authors' name were only to be guessed at. A favoured few would then receive a copy. Since we had no Xerox or fax-machines, typewriters and carbon paper were not too readily available, the treasured commodity had to be copied in long-hand, often in pencil and always with promises of major security measures.

My sister Katie had her sources, and we could tell by some of her coy remarks if she may indeed, have a copy hidden somewhere. During the cow-milking, when the other family members were busy in cow-shed and dairy, it was my job to "hunt" discreetly in her room to discover its whereabouts. If successful, then Eileen and myself would try to copy it by the light of the fire after the Rosary was said and the others had gone to bed.

The next afternoon, with this coveted coup pending disclosure, we excitedly gathered with our cronies, the Murphys, the Coopers, the Sullivans, the McCarthys, the Sheas, the Brock, and possibly the O'Neills from Tennis. Our



usual trysting place was Mike Tom's cross, on our way home from Ballyhearney School. After we had giggled, sniggered, criticized and thoroughly critiqued it, to our individual and collective satisfaction, we hurried home to do our after-school chores or "jobs" as they were called in those days.

Unfortunately, when we ourselves, came of age to be mentioned in the List, the custom had become obsolete. Immigration to England after World War II brought many of our fun-filled customs and traditions to a halt, and eventually to an end. We began to think of some of them as worthless or superstitious, and no particular value to anyone. I don't remember the words of any one List, but I will try my hand at giving you a sample of what a part of a Skelligs List might sound like.

*The moon is up, the storm's spent  
We're on our way, for Skelligs bent  
With Noney in charge, we don't give a whack  
Mary B. will make sure, we get there and back.*

*Big Tim is on board, I'm surprized he's alone  
I know that a bride he hopes to bring home,  
His shoes are well polished and so is his hair,  
Perhaps his Altson, he soon will ensnare.*

*Joe Lynch from the mill is a bachelor still  
But we know that a wife he has chosen  
Now Mollie is here, and his motives are clear  
For love is their major emotion.*

*Con Lyne from Cooil is handsome and shrewd  
He's liked Katie Bawneen since both were in school,  
But Katie's grown up now and courts Johnie Shea  
Methinks that brave Con would allure her away.*

After much inquiring, cajoling and conniving, I recently came

into possession of what is claimed to be an authentic List of 1954 vintage. As far as I know there is no "known" author. In all probability there never was a "known" author as this kind of notoriety warranted major secretarial measures.

### SKELLIGS LIST 1954

*On next shrove Tuesday night as on many times before,  
The "Thomas" will set out from Valentia Island's shore.  
When the mail is all drawn, and the last train-ferry made,  
The couples will gather for this gay escapade.*

*Paddy will be polished up, but he'll still forlorn be,  
For Josephine has departed across the Irish Sea.  
She says that she'll return to marry him some day,  
Let's hope before she does come back, Bridie Cadden's gone away.*

*The widow Mrs. Foran will be there with her new beau,  
For she knows that Mike Cantillon is the guy with all the dough.  
Though Denny Lyne is lonely now, his luck he never knows  
For Mike will leave the tea-house when the teapot overflows.*

*We hear that the McCrohan Twins are becoming farmer's wives,  
It's a sensible decision to do something with their lives,  
But John Higgins and Mick Falvey won't need the famous buns,  
That the twins so often baked up, in the tea-shop Nora runs.*

*Benny Smith is rather anxious to keep Nealie on a string,  
So when he doesn't answer she gives John Lynch a ring.  
But John is getting clever, and won't answer every call  
So she'll have to be contented with keeping up McCarthy's wall.*

*Mary Hanrahan, the teacher, is by no long odds, a fool,  
She'll be teaching Joseph Sullivan, things he never learned at school.  
She arms herself with make-up and continental scent,  
So after this Shrove Tuesday, She'll not need to pay the rent.*



*When Eileen Quigley landed home with brand new Cockney slang,  
Desmond Burke put on his best attire, and of his riches sang,  
He thought she'd be delighted his blushing bride to be.  
But very soon his "eye was wiped" by Neill from Portmagee.*

*Through Maureen Leary lost some teeth, she's no worse off, we know,  
'Cause Jamsie wouldn't change her for Marilyn Monroe,  
But now she's getting tired of making Uniacke's tea,  
She'd rather wait on Jamsie in the cottage by the sea.*

*With the Bridge around the corner, and a farm thats doing fine,  
'Tis the finest seasons fishing with a catch like Maureen Lyne.  
But John Quigley isn't satisfied with one string to his bow,  
He has to have Maureen Murphy or someone else in tow.*

*Tedneen wouldn't like to think that Dolly could entertain  
A man from the "Isolda" in her rambling large domain.  
he'd rather think of hotel rooms with drapes and carpets matched,  
But perhaps he's counting chickens too long before they're hatched.*

*For Patie Shea each evening, Josephine with patience waits,  
'Cause he sure has lots of glamour, like the guys back in the states.  
But sometimes while she's waiting, he's back at Carrigleigh,  
Waving madly to Eileen Moriarty, across the way, in Portmagee.*

*Theresa has returned, as she promised without fail  
With a fresh supply of accents from off the British Rail  
John Curran's in a panic now, he no longer can delay,  
He knows 'tis now or never, he must name the wedding day.*

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## THE "BEST YEARS. . .OF MY LIFE"

When I was almost fourteen years old, I decided it was time to go to secondary school. My sister Eileen (Nell) had gone the previous year, and I was in line to do everything she did, but two years later. However, I had skipped a grade for whatever reason, and now the other girls in my class were leaving in order to work, and the teacher almost told us that we had been with him long enough. So, I told my mother that I thought I should go to Secondary School after Christmas. Strangely enough, she didn't favour the idea. She made excuses such as, "I don't think you are able for the long journey; seven miles of cycling to school in the morning and seven back in the evening would be too much for you. Your bronchitis will act up again. Besides, I'll need you at home when Katie gets married. . .". it was the last remark that did it! Katie who was twenty-four assured my mother that she had no intention of getting married soon. She wasn't sure she would marry her current boyfriend. She advocated my going to Secondary School as I wasn't much help around the house anyway. So I went!

Because Mr. Griffin was an excellent primary school teacher, I was allowed to enter the second year of Secondary School. My sister had done this, and the nuns were happy with her progress, so they allowed me to do likewise. With the stipulation that I take first year french and geometry as extras. This worked out fine with the French, which I loved, but I could never learn to care much whether one angle equalled, was larger than, or smaller than another. Somehow geometry never "took" with me. These were the war years! Economically, and in most other ways they were the good years! Britain needed our cattle and dairy produce, and removed the tariff. Prices for animals and farm-produce soared. There was some rationing of tea, sugar, raisins, white-flour and such imported commodities, but since we grew most of our own food, we did not suffer greatly. We were even able to grind our own wheat on a small scale. My brother, John, rigged up two old querns, and attached them to



a long shaft. This was yolked up to a horse or pony. The grain was then fed into the querns and lo, and behold, a rather coarse wheat-flour was produced! When this was further sieved a little, it could be made into crunchy brown bread, which tasted good with plenty of butter. My very generous Auntie Nell who lived in New York, often sent us packages of tea, and it was always "Christmas" for me, when these arrived.

Because of our strict patriotic bent, all the young men who had sought employment in England during the Economic War, now returned full-force. Giving one's life for Ireland was an honour, but for England, no way! Knowing nothing of the atrocities committed by Hitler against the Jews, and less about the politics that caused the war, I was just grateful that Germany did not make Ireland a stepping-stone in the conquering of Britain.

Looking back, after becoming aware of all the suffering which World War II caused, it seems insensitive to say that these were, in fact, the best years of my life! I was fifteen years old, reasonably attractive, Eileen and myself were now allowed to



*My mother outside the old home at Coromore in 1964 (Aged 78)*

attend the local dances on Sunday night. because of the war, there were plenty of male companions to choose from. What more could we want from life? The nuns were a little stricter than our primary teachers, and we had lots of homework, but by and large life was good. I became more out-going, fun-loving and light-hearted. My mother, God love her, always wanted us to get more out of life, and often overlooked our returning late from the dances, although I know she worried about us constantly.

One of my greatest problems at this time was the lack of store bought clothing. Formerly, my mother sent to England and ordered our clothes through the mail-catalogue. When we could no longer do this, she made most of our things herself with the help of her sewing machine. Now, materials were scarce and more expensive, and new styles were being introduced by girls returning from England for the holidays. I often borrowed my older sister's dresses, being sure to return them before she became aware that they were missing. Once I borrowed her high-heeled shoes, and, unfortunately, lost the heel of one of the shoes on the muddy country road on the way home. I picked it up in the morning on my way to school, but the damage was done. I had returned the shoes, minus the heel, and my sister had discovered this before I could equal things out. There were "wigs on the green" when I returned from school, but on producing the missing item, all was forgiven, at least for the time being.

Sometimes, during the winter, the "channel" was rough and our ferry boat could not venture out at all. At other times, our landing on the far side would be delayed because of high gales, and stormy waters. Often we had to return home without going to school, or worse still, arrive late. We loved these little breaks, but our teacher hated them, and acted as if we were involved in some kind of conspiracy to miss school and cause them aggravation. Consequently, we had to board in the town, for at least one year before we took our final exams. As the convent did not have a boarding facility, I stayed with my Uncle Denny who owned a bar, grocery, and hardware store. His wife, Maura



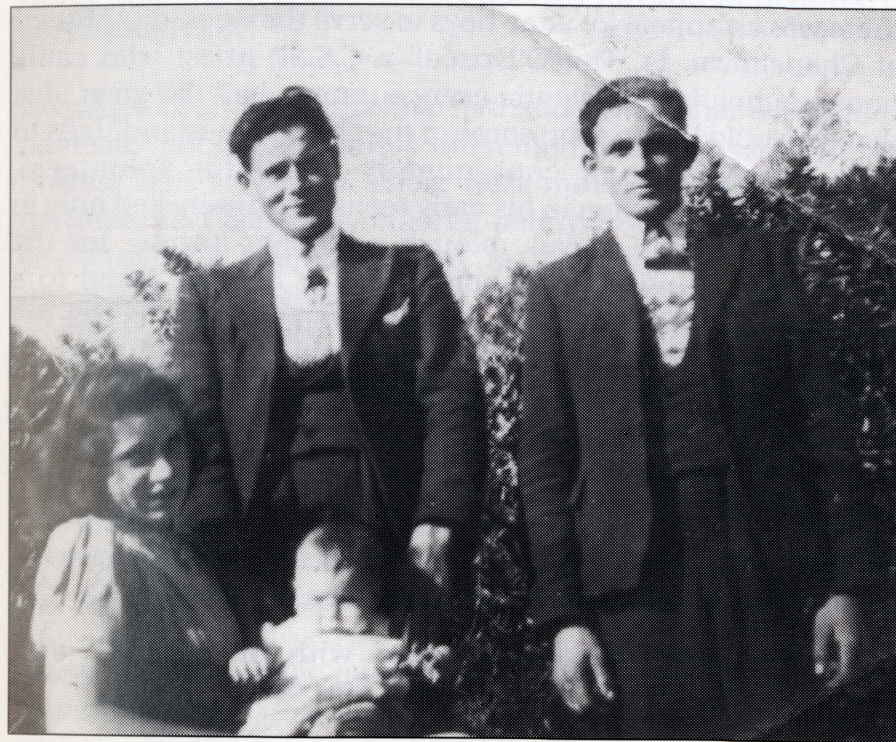
was a teacher in a school outside the town. They owned a car and were considered well-off. I fitted in fairly well with my six cousins, being a little older than the oldest daughter, Kathleen, who was very grown up for her years. The best thing about staying in the town was that I could go down the street to my friend's house and we would do our homework together. She did all the geometry problems and would explain them a little as I copied them. I would do two different Irish compositions, one of which she would transcribe in her own handwriting. It worked out wonderfully, and morality never seemed to enter into it. We were aware, of course, that copying in an exam or test was wrong. This was impossible, anyway, as there was no objective testing in our day. All answers were in essay form, and our desks were positioned so far apart that cheating would have been impossible, or so I thought then. Later, during my own teaching years, I found that I was a little naïve in this respect, and had to learn the hard way that cheating can be reduced to a fine art.

While staying in town, I was able to go to dances twice a week. My uncle did not favour this and threatened to tell my mother, but he was usually too busy in the bar to notice, and I slipped in and out without his knowledge, and with assistance of my sympathetic cousins, Kathleen, Maureen, and Peggy.

Sometimes we were able to go to the movies on Saturday nights, especially during Lent when the parish dance-hall were closed. Unfortunately the cinema was situated right opposite the convent window, but the cover of darkness and/or a tall escort usually did the trick. Praise the Lord, we were never caught! My sister finished school and would have liked to train as a nurse in Dublin, but getting into one of the better hospitals was impossible without a large financial backing as well as first class Educational Certificates. Although her grades were fine, we still did not have much money! So, she went to work in my brother Dave's grocery store in Dublin. How I missed her! "You never miss the water till the well runs dry!" I thought it would be nice to have my own room and her boyfriend on whom I had a crush, but although both were now available, they did not make

up for her absence. I missed our long chats before going to sleep. I missed getting her opinion and advice regarding clothes and boyfriends and family matters. I missed her caring and her dependability. Although our lives have been lived apart except for brief visits in the summer, she is still caring and loving and generous, the "salt of the earth".

One of my first boyfriends was fifteen years older than I. I suppose I was looking for a "father figure"! My family started to call him "Grandpa" and that was the end of that! When I was eighteen I thought I had me "Mr. Right". I was very much in love with him, but he had to go up the country to work in a beef factory and "out of sight, out of mind" proved itself true in my regard. I did receive love-letters, of which I was very proud. My very first one, and wouldn't you know it, my mother read it first! She said she opened it by mistake. Anyway, I don't think I ever



Con Lyne Brother-in-Law), Mick Lynch (Brother) and myself (aged 18) holding my baby nephew Timothy Lyne - 1947



answered. It was a bit mushy and these things peter out in their own way when you're still in your teens.

Then I met someone new! This time the shoe was on the other foot. Unfortunately, after we had gone out twice, he dropped me for someone else, and I was broken-hearted, or so I thought for a long time. I could still eat, but I could not sleep, my pride was hurt and I was as cranky as a bag of cats. I happened to be reading *GONE WITH THE WIND* at this time and in true *Scarlet* fashion, I believed that he still loved me. He didn't, of course, but I carried the torch for at least three whole agonising months. Then on the night of August 15, at what we called Caol Hall or John Williams I met somebody new, more handsome, mature, and more fun to be with. My heart soared once more and the skies looked blue again.

When my youngest brother, Denis was about ten years old, there was an appeal for altar-boys to serve the week-day Masses at Chapeltown. Fr. Tim O'Driscoll a C.S.SP. priest who came home on holiday to Valentia every summer, had the great idea that he would like to train some of the "back-the-island" lads to serve his Mass, and consequently asked for volunteers. Michael, who was then in his early teens, was interested only in farming. He could already plough a straight furrow for the spring seed-planting, or handle team of horses yoked to a reaping machine at harvest time. We hoped that he and my oldest brother would one day share the farm and work as partners but this was not to be. Michael had no yen to be an altar-boy, but Denis showed keen interest. Fortunately, the nuns had taught us to make the Mass responses in Latin, and I was very happy to share my expertise with Denis.

On his first morning, I was more nervous than he. I knelt in the first pew, so that I could prompt him if he "got stuck".

He didn't, and my heart swelled with pride as Fr. Tim congratulated us both after the Mass was over.

## "DUBLIN'S FAIR CITY"

When I finished Secondary School in Caherciveen, there were still very few jobs available for "school leavers". For a while I worked in a solicitor's office. Chrissie Sullivan, the legal secretary, was very good to me, but the pay was not good. When I arrived for the interview, I was so nervous that I forgot my shorthand and wasn't able to read the letter back when the boss requested it typed, but Chrissie helped me out, and we became best friends.

After a year or so, I knew that the job had no future in it, so I filled out some forms and thought that I would like to go in for nurse-training in England. So, I quit my job and went home to sort myself out.

My older sister had since married and my mother was glad to have me home for a while. I still remember that Spring. All the flowers were in bloom. There were mounds of bluebells and daffodils and delicately colored pale yellow primroses in the sheltered side of every hedge. In the front garden, we had narcissuses and rockets and lilac and hydrangea, and I cleaned up the yard and planted and transplanted to my heart's content! I would have wished never to leave our island. The scenery was so beautiful! But, I knew that I must. Nursing in England didn't seem all that attractive. There were stories of classmates who had found themselves preparing corpses for burial, down in the morgue on Christmas night! They told how they had cried thinking of the simple comforts of home and the family together around the bright peat fire.

Then, very suddenly, the teacher in a small local school was transferred, and they needed a teacher to finish out the year with the possibility of being given a permanent teaching job in the fall. It should have been what I was looking for, but I knew



that it was not for me. While I was still considering it, I prayed like I never prayer before. I prayed for a miracle. I kept a light burning in front of the picture of the Sacred Heart, and I made every novena that I had ever heard of, especially to the Sacred Heart, to whom I have a very profound devotion, and it happened, a first class, out of the blue miracle. It was June 13, the feast of the Sacred Heart, and it was on a Friday! I had attended the funeral of a young girl about my own age who had died of tuberculosis. it was a very sad event as she came from a very large family in the neighbourhood. Afterwards, I stopped at the Knightstown Post Office to pick up the mail, since we did not have delivery every day. I found a very formal looking envelope addressed to myself. Mystified, I tore it open and found that the Irish Civil Service was now offering me a job through an exam I had taken sometime previously. When I took that exam I was running a temperature and had sties in both my eyes, but I insisted on taking the exam because I needed a job so badly. The result was that I didn't get placed that year, but now, it seemed that they were calling more candidates from that back-exam, and I happened to be in there, within the cut-off number. I didn't figure all this out until I went over to Mary Lowney-McCarthy's to see if she could help clarify things for me, and she did, because her own sister Frances had been called to the Civil Service the previous year.

I couldn't believe my good fortune! However, the rest of the family, especially my mother, wasn't happy. They would have liked for me to take the teaching position and live at home. The pastor who had used his influence to get me the teaching job would be the hardest to tell. My mother insisted that I do it myself, and I was scared, but I did it, and he understood when I explained to him that my brother would soon be married and that I did not want to live in with a sister-in-law, so he left me off the hook. I walked on air for the next month or so before being called to Dublin for my oral examination before the Board. This would be in Gaelic, which, for us of that

particular generation, was a second language, not our primary as it had been for our grandparents and some of our parents. They called my grandfather "Old Bearla" which means "the old English man", because he always insisted on speaking English and wrote letters to America for half the Island because of his fluency in that language. However, at this particular time, I wished he had been more bilingual, and that he had taught me a little gaelic as well, because of course, Gaelic was the "in" language in the schools at this time of our newly founded Republic.

Early in September, I went to Dublin, stayed with my brother Dave, took my orals, and was given a job in the Special Employment Schemes Office located in the Board of Works Building in Stephen's Green. Dave had a car, and he was very generous with a ride whenever myself or my friends needed to go somewhere a bus didn't run. We often went to Kingsbridge Train Station (now renamed Heuston after a patriot of the 1916 Revolution), to pick up friends from home who were on their way to catch the Dun Laoghaire Ferry to Hollyhead, because they had found work in England. It was sad to see the draining of the young Irish lads and lasses from their homeland to work in "the buildings" reconstructing the English cities damaged by World War II. I had two sisters and one brother who were forced to take that route, but they worked hard, bought pretty good homes, and brought up their families in London and Birmingham.

The greatest thing about Dublin was that there was dancing every single night of the week! Around Parnell Square alone there were at least twelve dance halls, so we could pick and choose. The National was good on Monday nights, but they did mostly ballroom dancing. The Galway Arms was well attended on Tuesdays but you were a little lost if you were not from Galway. I can't remember which was best on Wednesdays, but I think it was one of the Irish Céilidhe Halls. They spoke only Gaelic there, and we were not exactly fluent



in the Irish language. But the Teachers Hall was great on Saturday nights, as was the A.O.H. on a Friday night. On Sunday nights everywhere was crowded, so we often went to Barrys because Mena knew a Kilkenny crowd who went there. The great advantage was that none of these places cost very much, six pence at most, or a shilling on weekends. There were several movie houses as well, and movies were always good for a date during the week. For a while it seemed as if I had died and gone to heaven! Then it paled a little. My more pious friends like Marie and Aoifa, two Dublin girls, started working on me to join the Legion of Mary. I joined a presidium in Gardner Street. We met on Tuesday nights, and did visitation of the tenement houses on Wednesday evenings. The poverty and the destitute were appalling! There were families who had come up from the clean, fresh air and green fields of the country, living four flights up in one small room. The odours were horrible. I thought that we had very little luxuries growing up, but compared to the "bread and spread" which was the daily, weekly, and yearly diet of these poor people, we had lived in the lap of luxury! Now I saw what Sean O'Casey's plays were all about. it was all right there, in Upper Gardiner Street. It was a revelation! By degrees it was coming to me that my own life was rather empty and selfish. I wanted to be part of making a better world. I prayed for grace and guidance, but, in the meantime, I was in no hurry to change. I began to go to early morning Mass at St. Michael's on the Quays, or at noontime at St. Theresa's off Grafton Street, but it took at least two more years to make up my mind.

## "LOVE IS NOT LOVE THAT ALTERS, WHEN IT ALTERATION FINDS"

While working in the Civil Service in Dublin, my friends Mena, Claire and myself, decided that the time had come for us to graduate from the "country" dance halls, such as the A.O.H. and the Teachers Hall, and branch out into something more sophisticated like the National or the Crystal. In order to qualify we needed to know how to fox-trot, do the slow-waltz, the rumba and perhaps even the tango.

So, in due course, we took ourselves off to the Butler's School of dancing, on the Quays. Later on, when I read Dorothy Parker's wonderful poem entitled "THE WALTZ". I could see myself in the role of the gauche, bouncing, eager-beaver unappreciated partner. At Butlers, we met two girls of our own age and life-style who confessed to having similar aspirations, and we all became fast friends. One of our new friends had a steady boyfriend, but the other, Ellen, like ourselves, dated now and then but had no "steady" boyfriend.

While we waited for the Maestro to take us through our paces on the dance-floor, we exchanged confidences. When I related to Ellen some of the woes and rigors of growing up in a large single parent family, she said that in a way she envied me. She figured that since I had already experienced the "ups" and



Sheila O'Flynn, Kate Parkes, Sr. Alice (Clarice), Mary Sweeney and Mary Mulvihill.



"downs" and "around the bends" of life, I knew what to expect and consequently was better prepared. She, on the other hand, came from a stable rather well-off family. Both her parents were very much still alive, and she had experienced a smooth fairly uneventful life, which, according to her logic, left waiting to jump out and catch her unawares. I thought she was crazy because I still felt very unprepared for pain and suffering, no matter how often they showed up.

Ellen was a very attractive girl, friendly, sincere, and fun to be with. She worked as a sales person in a fashionable boutique in North Dublin, and was very good at her job. She lived in a comfortable apartment which she shared with her sister Laura.

Shortly after we had become acquainted, Ellen arrived at the dance studio one Monday night with the great news that she had met someone special. We couldn't wait to hear all about it. Usually, Ellen was rather difficult to please in the boyfriends departments. Well, his name was Ronald, she told us. He was from Leitrim or Roscommon. He was very good-looking, well-dressed, well-educated and polite. His family background seemed impeccable, and he was a farmer and cattle dealer by trade.

We were all very happy for her, and quite possibly a little jealous. The courtship followed a very definite routine, established and agreeable to both. Ronald came to Dublin on Friday mornings, and after completing his business he called Ellen and they went out for lunch or early dinner. If possible, they took in a show. On Saturday they went for a leisurely drive along the Bay to Howth or Bray where they had lunch and walked on the beach. They ended up that evening in the National, where Ellen was able to show off the progress she had made at Butler's. On Sunday, they both attended Mass, either together or separately. After a late breakfast or early lunch they went for a long walk in Phoenix Park. In the early

afternoon, Ronald started for home in order to miss the Sunday traffic-jams. He called her on Wednesdays as regular as clockwork. If all this did not add up to his being "Mr. Right", what else could we expect? Then he gave her a gold watch for Christmas. In the parlance of Dublin in these "rare auld times" this latter gesture was equivalent to a "tacit engagement". Mena told us that she knew of many who had gone this route and were now engaged or married. Ellen herself confessed that she would not be surprised if Ronald proposed on Valentine's day or on her birthday. She was hoping that he would.

Then, one Monday evening, both girls were missing from Butler's Studio. During the week, her friend called us to tell us that she felt that it was all off between Ronald and Ellen. Evidently he had not come to Dublin that weekend and called giving the excuse that some urgent family problems had interfered. He did not call during the week, and when Ellen called him, she could not reach him. Then he had a brief call telling her he would not be able to see her for the time being, at least. He gave her no explanation. There had been no disagreement, no cooling-off period, no signs of boredom or discontent. Ellen was shattered, devastated, heart-broken. Being Ellen, she did not protest or plead or carry-on. She knew it was over, but she would have liked some explanation. None ever showed up.

We were all very much aware of the deep pain which Ellen endured during this time. We invited her to join us at the Teachers on Friday nights, or at the National or wherever, hoping that she would soon meet someone else, but Ellen was not interested in the "other fish in the sea". In her case, Shakespeare seems to have been proven right in saying "Love is not love that alters . . . when it alteration finds".

Later, when I told her of my decision to enter the convent, she wished she could do likewise but knew that it would not be for



the right reason. The convent is not a place to which one could escape a broken heart, and Ellen was too honest to pretend that she felt called to the religious life.

We still kept in touch, and in 1952 after I had made an eight day retreat in preparation for being received into the Sisters of St.. Joseph of Mewark, I received news of her death. She had been to a Buyers Convention in London. She wrote to me for my big day and promised me that she would try and come to America for my next big event. On her way home from London, her plane was lost in the Welsh mountains, and I never saw her again. I received news of her death at the same time that I received her letter of congratulations. There was no one with whom I could share the news, as none of the others in my group knew Ellen, and in those days it was a weakness to grieve. Thank God for Vatican Council II, and for Pope John XXIII who initiated such wonderful and humane changes in the Catholic Church and in Religious Life. Now we are encouraged to grieve and help others in their grieving. When I return to Ireland, as I often do, these days, I always remember Ellen as a staunch friend and one of the most authentically Christian people I have ever met.

## "IF ALL THE YEAR PLAYING HOLIDAY . . . ."

Coming back to the story of my life in Dublin, I found that knowing that I should do something different with my life is one thing, but actually taking some action towards it in this regard is another.



*My brothers Dave and Denis Lynch*

For the first time in my life I was financially independent. I was free from any kind of parental supervision. I had few responsibilities outside my job. No one was depending on me. I could go dancing as many times a week as I wished. I could go back to Kerry at least twice a year. I owned a nice new Raleigh bicycle. My brother Dave had a car with which he was quite generous when myself or my friends needed a ride. As an added bonus, my youngest brother, Denis, had recently come to live with us in Dublin, so it was like having family again. My social life was not exactly hectic, but it was there. Why would I want to leave all this for something new and unknown?

By degrees, I realized that I quite possibly had a vocation or call to the Religious Life, the life of a nun. One of my friends in the office seemed to be more sure of this than I was, but there was no way that I would admit that she might be right. As a concession, I joined the Legion of Mary, and became involved in the visitation of poor families in the tenements of Gardiner Street. That was a revelation to me, and I knew then that I wanted to make a difference.





*My cousin Gertie Murphy (1960 who had joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace three years before me.*

*This picture was taken in California where we were missioned together briefly.*

After Maura and myself had prayed for discernment (although we did not know this name for it) we finally got around to choosing a Religious Order which would be right for me.

I had a strong bent towards the Irish Medical Missionaries of Mary. Their foundress Mother Mary Martin was still alive, and their habit was a little more modern than most. Then there was the Sisters of St.. Joseph of Newark which my cousin Gertie had joined three years earlier. As Sr. Fidelis, she was now teaching the third grade somewhere out near Seattle. That sounded good also.

Like Gideon in the Old Testament, I have always looked for signs. I told the Lord and Maura Callery that I had no intention of spending time saving up a large dowry for the convent. I decided that I would write to the two Orders of my preference, and tell them that I was a working girl with no bank account,

that I came from a large family with plenty other commitments, and that, consequently, I would not be able to supply the usual dowry. If one of them accepted this financial situation, then that was the one I would enter. The Medical Missionaries wrote back a very nice letter stating that the dowry was necessary for my own security in case I ever left the convent. Sr. Cecilia Agnes of the Sisters of St. Joseph wrote that since my education background was quite adequate, and all other requirements were in order, she had asked the Rev. Mother to waive the dowry. So, I had my sign and my answer. Sister invited me to enter on September 8, in Cabra, Co. Down, along with a few other girls who had been accepted. This was late July! It didn't give me much time to change my mind. I decided to "go for it". I immediately applied for my two weeks vacation and I went home to Valentia. I knew that while my mother would be delighted that I had decided to make such a wise and "safe" choice as entering the convent, she would not like that I had chosen an Order that was based mainly in America. I did not tell her until I was safely back in Dublin after my visit. I did tell my sister Eileen, who had since married and lived in Birmingham. Although she had a ten-month old daughter, Maureen, Eileen immediately arranged to take a holiday and spend one last time with me at home in Kerry.

She did try to persuade me to forget the whole thing . . . she wanted to make sure I was doing the right thing . . . I always hated getting up in the morning . . . now I would have to get up at the ungodly hour of five or five-thirty . . . what would I do for entertainment . . . how would I feel on Saturday and Sunday nights when there were no dances . . . and no boyfriends!! On the other hand I think she was sorry she hadn't thought of it herself. Her marriage seemed happy enough, but they had their struggles.

I returned to Dublin with my mind still set on my new venture. September 8, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, rolled around very quickly. My friends at S.E.S.O. gave me the usual



office presentation. I received a beautiful blue plush bathrobe with matching fur-lined slippers (which, fortunately I was allowed to keep while I was a postulant). They also gave a large man-sized pocket watch, because someone knew that nuns were not allowed to wear wrist-watches in those days.

On the day appointed, my brother Dave, his wife Alice, and many of my friends came to see me off at the train station. I was too excited to feel lonely at the time. After some quick "Goodbyes" I boarded the train at Amiens Street, bound for Newry, Co. Down where I would do my Aspirancy.

Thus, I was on my way to see the world via the convent and the Congregation of the Sisters of St.. Joseph of Peace.

Just last week someone gave me a clipping from "The Irish Echo" a newspaper published in the U.S. It states that the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin want to name a certain street after the "rebel" Nun of Kenmare, whose radical views on the rights of women and the poor caused her much grief, and unpopularity among the hierarchy. Her name was Sr. Margaret Anna Cusak, and she was the foundress of the religious Order I had unknowingly entered on that far off day, back in 1950. Although I didn't know it then, I had "hooked up" with some wonderful company.

My roots are still back Valentia, across the way from Daingean Ui Cuise, and not very far from Kenmare, but I have lived in, and flown three continents. With a niece Maire married in Japan with three lovely children, with Lil Sugrue Hill (formerly of Farranreigh, Valentia) and her daughter Anne Marie in Australia, and my cousin, friend and next-door neighbor Gertie Murphy Steel in New Zealand, I think my wings are still unfurling. All I can say is, in the words of St.. Paul:

*Glory to him whose power, working in us,  
can do infinitely more that we can ask or imagine.*

Ephesians 3 : 20

## A TIME TO BE WEANED . . PRUNED . . AND GROOMED . .

Our journey from Dublin to Newry, Co. Down, was not very traumatic. We refused to let ourselves become maudlin or sentimental. My sister Breda had come from London to be with me, and it made me feel really good that she cared enough to be with me at this time. She had once boarded at an Agricultural Training College somewhere in the South of Ireland, for a short length of time, and did not have the highest opinion of the sisterhood. I think she felt that I needed some kind of benevolent protection.



Alice Murphy-Conway, Breda (my sister), Sr. Bertilla Murphy and Maria O'Shea (Breda's daughter).

After we left Amiens St. behind we soon met the effervescent Collins twins from Galway, and a pretty dark-haired girl, named Aine Brennan. All four of us were headed in the same direction. The twins, Peg and Celia were chatty and, in their own words, "full of the old harry!" We enjoyed one another's company and were very intent on having "one last fling" before entering the "hallowed halls" of our new abode.

After a short wait at Newry Station, we were met by Sr. Juliana, the superior of the convent where we would live while waiting to go to America. She was dressed in full regalia and this was the first time I had seen a nun dressed in the habit of our



Order. With her was a candidate, Elizabeth Mullen from Dun Laoghaire, also dressed in clerical black but of a simple design. She looked as if "born to the cloth" but nice and friendly. So far, all five of us, candidates, seemed to be somewhere in our mid-twenties, but we shortly joined two bouncing teenagers, named Maureen and Philomena who had come in from Leitrim. They wore their hair tied up in large blue bows and were very definitely not in our bracket. Jealously, we wondered if the Convent was now so desperate for new recruits it was resorting to "robbing the cradle"! We need not have worried for these two girls turned out to be real champs and very mature for their age.

We all bonded very nicely together during our time in the North, and we are still friends today.

Our twelve mile ride to the mansion, which had been converted into a kind Juniorate, was full of thrills and spills, as Sr. Julianna maneuvered the station wagon round those hairpin bends through the Mourne Mountains. We daren't cry out, afraid that we would be reprimanded for childishness. Coming from Kerry, they were nothing new to me. Actually, I think we laughed a lot, although we were afraid.

We remained in Cabra, Co. Down, for the next nine months. As far as I could comprehend, the main purpose of our sojourn in this secluded spot was to Americanize us, without making this too obvious to very proud Irish lassies.

During the day, we had classes in American History and English grammar (especially the disgranning of sentences) and we learned to say the Office of Our Lady in Latin. We learned to dust, mop, and scrub and weed the vegetable garden and pick apples. While I was well prepared in the educational department and loved learning anything new, I hated the outside chores. I had plenty of experience on the farm and did not want to go back to any of it. However, I was

assured that there would be no farm chores in America, so I just had to grin and bear it, and be glad for the things I like to do, like helping some of those who were less fortunate. The residence was operating on a minimal budget. Sister Superior tried to make us as self-sustaining as possible. She also believed that idleness was the devil's workshop, which was often a little hard to take.

We were very fortunate in having a wonderfully understanding postulant mistress, Sr. Cecilia Agnes from Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. She was a good teacher and a good Spiritual Director. She understood that most of us were accustomed to some kind of social life before entering. Therefore, she provided records to which we could dance for a few hours on Sunday nights and on feast days. That was our salvation! It may not have been up to the standard we were used to, but it was a very good substitute, and provided the exercise and recreation we needed. Otherwise, we darned stockings, embroidered flowers on hankies and tablecloths and exchanged confidences about boyfriends of the past.

When we were expecting a visit from our Mother Provincial, Mother Patricia Moran, Sr. Cecilia Agnes gave us a play which she thought we might produce. I think I was somewhat in charge of this, as I can remember designing most of the costumes. I can't remember the plot, but I do remember that it had a morality theme. We represented virtues and vices. The former dressed in multicolored flower costumes, and the latter were all black. I had a great time helping my companions cut out and sew the brightly colored tissue paper which we used for outfits. Believe it or not, it was a great success, we all enjoyed it, and Mother Patricia, with her glasses down on her nose, gave it high praise, saying in her inimitable way, "I say now, they are very creative, aren't they?" When she heard that we were responsible for all of it, ourselves, she was convinced that she could expect a dozen or so geniuses on the next boat to the U.S.



I'm not going to pretend that it wasn't sometimes lonely when I first entered the convent. As a matter of fact, even now there are times when I still feel lonely. I think it's probably the human condition. Anyway, I especially missed the dances on Saturday nights in Parnell Square, but that became the night for our weekly soak in a nice hot bath, getting our hair washed and our fingernails trimmed, for making sure our Sunday outfit was clean and pressed and that we had enough clean underwear for the coming week. Not quite so exciting as twirling and prancing to set-dance music at the Teachers, but we did have some moments of mild hilarity and excitement.

## "GET OUT! GET OUT! . . . . . WHOEVER YOU ARE!"

Major feast days are always special in the convent. That is especially true of march 19, the feast of St. Joseph, who is our patron. On such gala occasions, we celebrated with a wonderful dinner and special dessert, and then we were free to do whatever we like (within bounds, of course). walking around the grounds and exchanging confidences was first on our agenda, to be followed by writing home and/or to our friends. Then, after "High Tea" with delicious raisin scones and apple, strawberry or gooseberry pie, we could dance, listen to music, read, or amuse one another telling stories and jokes until the time for night prayers and Office.



*Kathleen O'Sullivan (Woodward), an old school friend with her mother Alice (1964). She and her sister Alice had given me the manicure set, I used in Cabra.*

It must have been March 19, 1951, just around the time we had received definite word of when we were scheduled to leave for the U.S. . . Strolling on the grounds and whispering about what we thought life might be like in New Jersey or Seattle, we heard a loud crash! Triggered by a guilty conscience, I took off into the building and up the stairs. I was heading for our dormitory. Although there were some large mirrors throughout the mansion, there were none in our dormitories. Neither did we receive a mirror as part of our personal equipment. Fortunately, I had received a handmade manicure



set from my high school friend, Alice Sullivan, in the cover of which was embedded a small oblong mirror. This became my most precious possession. I kept it on the top of the screen provided for the privacy of each postulant. I used it to straighten my veil, adjust my collar and watch my never too curly hair become straight and stringy from lack of professional care. When I loaned it out to the others in the dormitory, my popularity grew considerably. It became a common treasure.

However, being in possession of this much-envied piece of equipment must have given me some slight feeling of guilt. I never knew whether it was legitimate to have it or not, and I didn't want to ask! On hearing the crash, I assumed that the wind had blown down the bed-screen and that my mirror was the victim. This could be a double-edged catastrophe! Not only would I lose my mirror, but I would have to make "reparation" for having it in the first place.

As I dashed up the stairs, my anxiety knew no bounds! Before I reached the top of the stairs, someone shrilled out at me, "Get out of here! Get out!" I was so stunned that I couldn't even move! It seemed like being in the middle of a Zane Grey Western. I froze, glued to the spot, my mouth open! The command was repeated and, as I followed the direction of the voice, I looked up and beheld two legs and half a human body coming through our ceiling. It was our superior, Sr. Julianna! I recognized the black stockings and the long-johns. It was indeed herself in a very vulnerable and precarious position! We had often said of her when she became angry that she "went through the roof" with the intensity of her emotion, but this time she literally "came through the roof". What could have enticed her into such a position!

Before I had much time to reflect upon the situation, Sr. Cecilia Agnes and another staff member, Sr. Sarah Joyce, appeared around a bend and beckoned to me. They explained

that Sr. Superior must have been rummaging in the attic and hit a soft or rotted spot among the floorboards. They were pretty sure that she was safe enough up there, as the attic floor was not, thank goodness, in complete disrepair, but how to get her out of her somewhat self-chosen position and predicament was the problem! She would not allow us to call in the workmen for help, and if the postulants became aware of the situation, this was one scene they would remember, and not want to miss. She herself was worried that if the workmen did come into the attic and try to pull her up out of the hole, a greater part of the ceiling might collapse and cause hurt and damage to anyone who chanced in that way. This was why she was yelling at me to get out, for my protection, not hers! Typical of Sr. Julianna's crisis management skills, she took charge. I was ordered to keep everyone out of the building. Then the other two sisters were ordered to pull out a bed from the adjoining dormitory, pack it with pillows and place it right under where she was perched, holding it down as firmly as possible. She herself then wriggled her body out of the hole and dropped down on to the waiting bed. It certainly took some maneuvering and courage. She refused to have the doctor come to examine her for broken bones but did consent to take supper in bed that evening. When it was all over we had a good laugh but not within the superior's hearing. Those of us who were in Cabra together for that incident need only say to one another even to this day, "Do you remember the day Julianna came through the ceiling?" and we instantaneously break into gales of reminiscent laughter. All's well that ends well. She lived to be ninety! God Bless Her! And never the worse for having "come through the roof" in Cabra, Co. Down. After medical and dental approval, vaccinations and passport pictures, we were fitted with almost new, black serge postulant garb, and pronounced ready for our journey to the U.S., which was booked for the middle of July.

Before leaving Ireland we were allowed a visit from our families. My brother Dave, his wife Alice, their baby daughter



Breda, and my cousin Kathleen, who was attending University in Dublin, represented my family. We had a very good visit. It would be fourteen long years before I would see them again. A visit home was considered too great a temptation or challenge to the survival of our religious vocation! Actually, we were too excited about our trip overseas to feel too overwhelmed with loneliness at that particular time. That would strike later with full force!

## **“COME TO A NEW LAND . . . . WHICH I WILL SHOW YOU.”**

From Northern Ireland, we took the night-boat to Scotland. From there, we sped southward by train to London. My sister Breda and her husband, Jim, met us at the station and I was allowed to spend the afternoon with them at their flat in London. That evening we boarded the train to Portsmouth and crossed over by ferry to France. The next day we found ourselves at Cherbourg, boarding the S.S. Elizabeth. We were on our way, Like Christopher Columbus, and so many Irish before us, to cross the “broad Atlantic”. It was exciting and exhilarating.

The journey took eight days. I tried to catch a glimpse of Valentia as we skirted the south coast of Ireland, but as usual, it was shrouded in fog. The cabins were small with bunk beds for four. We travelled tourist class, and were not allowed to enter first class. There were some games like table-tennis or Ping-Pong available on the deck, but Sr. Juliana felt that she had to supervise all our activities, which cramped our spontaneity quite a bit. The food was good, and we enjoyed the novelty until about the fourth day out, when a storm blew up and we were all very seasick even though Sister had supplied us with dramamine beforehand.

I don't remember too many more details about the trip, except that it was pleasant enough after the storm abated and we could eat again. Then around the eighth day, we were told that in the morning we would be passing the Statue of Liberty near the mouth of New York Harbor. Sure enough, the next morning at around 5 a.m. we were rattled out of our sleep by Sr. Juliana and told how lucky we were to be able to have such a close-up view of Lady Liberty, herself!



Recently some friends and myself took my niece Eilis and her husband Graham on a tour of New York Harbor, which included coming ashore and examining the statue close-up. After having taught American history for many years and being still very interested and involved with Civil Rights and Peace and Justice issues, I am now very moved by the invitation we issue from the base of this gigantic statue. As part of the poem by Emma Lazarus, we say to the world, "GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR, YOUR HUDDLED MASSES, YEARNING TO BE FREE . . ." and I'm sad to think how, as Americans, we have reneged on this invitation. However, at 5 a.m. on that sultry July morning in 1951, I must say that my grouchy self did not appreciate the honor!

SORRY LADY LIBERTY!

## "HERE I AM LORD" . . . Ready or not, here I come!

I don't think that my arrogance or my faith had ever reached making the former statement. The latter could be closer to the truth. However in these days of the early fifties, I think that we did see ourselves as "missionaries". I recently read that in the medieval Church, there were considered to be three kinds of martyrdom. There was the "red" martyrdom of those who gave their lives for the faith, the "green" martyrdom of those who became hermits and led the solitary and silent lives of work and prayer, and the "white" martyrdom initiated by St. Columcille attributed to those who gave up their native land and the hope of ever returning, in order to spread the faith in foreign lands. I guess, in a way, with some modifications, we could have been said to have belonged to the latter. When I entered the convent and came to America, it was with the awareness that I may never see Ireland again. For many years our sisters were allowed one visit home during their lifetime and that was after twenty or more years as a religious.

For most of us, it just never entered our heads to make a return visit a condition or a priority.

My three years in St. Michael's Novitiate on Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, were not all joy, but neither were they all "trouble and sorrow". However, if I had ever labored under the misconception that I had come to teach or even share the faith or anything else with my American counterparts then I was in for few surprises. It's amazing how the pronouncing, the enunciation, and the connotations (not to mind the accent) of the same language can have so many variations. Henry Higgins, in "MY FAIR LADY" struck chord when he said, in alluding to the English language that the Americans "haven't



used it for years!". Of course he also said in the same reference "the Scots and the Irish leave you close to tears". The view from my window of the George Washington was one of the highlights (no pun intended) of my Novitiate years. Its beauty reminded me of God's steadfast loving presence, later expressed so beautifully in the St.. Louis Jesuit hymn, "Be not afraid, behold, I go before you always! Come follow me!"

Our time in the Novitiate was pretty equally divided between the development of the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of our lives.

We arose each morning to the shrill sound of a five-thirty bell. We washed and maneuvered ourselves into the varying parts of our "holy" habits. After we straightened our gimps, fastened our headpieces, adjusted our forehead bands, and aligned our starched but often drooping "dominoes" (which looked like wings), we rushed down the four flights of stairs, and slid or skidded as quietly and inoffensively as possible in our assigned places in the chapel, after first demonstrating our reverence and profound humility by kissing the floor near our place of worship.

Morning prayers and meditations followed. The prayers went fine as they were proclaimed aloud and in common, but when it came to silent or not-so-silent slumber. Of course, our ever vigilant Novice Mistress was always at hand to disturb our nodding and /or snoring prayerfulness. I usually woke up in time for Mass.

Chanting the Office of Our Lady followed, and then breakfast. This was a very excellent meal and went by smoothly, except for those who showed a dislike for oatmeal porridge or boiled eggs. Everything had to be eaten unless excused by doctor's orders. I had very little problem there, as I've always eaten more than I need to to stay healthy.

Some of us stayed behind in the refectory and pantry to do the dishes and set up the table for the next meal. Others went to various assigned chores throughout the building. After a quick visit to the chapel, we went upstairs to make our beds and tidy our dormitory cubicles.

At ten-thirty, we washed our hands, removed our work-aprons, straightened whatever had gone askew, and dashed to the Novitiate Room on the third floor. There we had lecture with the Novice Mistress. There was no need to ask Ed Koch's question, "How am I doing?" We were told in no uncertain terms how we were doing. Sr. Rita Bates, who was the head Novice Mistress in my day, was strict, but our one saving grace was that she had a great sense of humor and could quit while she was ahead. When she found that her reprimands or sarcasm had cut a little deeper than she intended, she would tell a funny anecdote from her own teaching days in Pensgrove. Being an English teacher, Sr. Rita was very conscious of where your prepositions went. She often told the story of how, when she was principal of St.. James, she was, one afternoon, accosted in the hall by a disgruntled student who had been given a cleaning job as detention assignment. "Where do you keep your rags at?" the student demanded of this tall, regal, five-foot-ten, dignified sister-principal. Sr. Rita paused briefly and with all the scorn and disdain which her position as English grammar teacher and Principal afforded her, she pressed her hand towards her bosom and haughtily replied, "On me, dear!" and breezed off.

The point relating this story to us was two-fold. Besides the grammar usage there was a lesson somewhere there for us on the poverty of St.. Francis, which we were encouraged to emulate. We must never forget that we are living on "the pennies of the poor!" she was wont to remind us, so if we were reduced to wearing rags, what of it?

After our noon Office in the Chapel, we had a good dinner and usually a sumptuous dessert, followed by one hour of



recreation. Then we had Rosary in common, in the Chapel, and back to the classroom for a few more hours of lecture and study. I always found learning very stimulating, so this was my favorite time of day. After Evening Office, we had supper, then an hour of preparation or study, an hour of recreation, night prayers and so to bed. All lights had to be out by nine o'clock! Some novices used flashlights to finish up, but it was against the rules.

By the end of our Novitiate at Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, most of us had accumulated at least sixty credits towards our B.S. in Education from Seton Hall University. During Summer School, the sisters with First or Temporary Vows who were already out in various ministries joined us in the classroom. These sisters had a little more freedom than we novices had, and it was always great to exchange a few forbidden confidences with them regarding life "on the missions".

At the end of summer school sessions, our professors, Srs. Madeline, Dolorosa, Thecla, Pauline, Alaquo, and Marianna, and others helped the students produce a play or musical which was the highlight of the summer. The "H.M.S. Pinafore" was my favorite. I can still remember a strong young voice belting out, "I am the captain of the Pinafore, and a right good captain too . . . etc., etc." and "I'm poor little Buttercup . . ." and many others! Some of us helped with the scenery, with the costumes or with the lighting. It was a memorable time, and we missed the professed sisters when they left for vacation at our summer residence at Elberon when summer school ended.

As novices we often wrote and produced little vignettes for Social Studies classes with Sr. Dolorosa.

Algebra with Sr. Patricia Anne was one of my favorite subjects, as Mr. Griffin in Ballyhearney National School had given me a good foundation. This was continued and built upon by Sr.

Malachi and De Lourdes at the Presentation Secondary School in Caherciveen.

I had it made in Sr. Michael's French class also because of Sr. Bonaventure's merciless drilling while studying for my Inter and Leaving Certs. Actually I have nothing but gratitude for all my teachers. I have been very lucky in that area.

During our last year as senior novices, we were all taken to neighboring parishes to teach C.C.D. to Catholic students who had attended public school. This was good practice-teaching but the classes were overcrowded and the facilities very inadequate, but it gave us some experience, especially in the field of discipline.

Most of us hoped to become teachers. Only a few expressed the desire to work in one of the orphanages or in the Printing Room, which produced our Province magazine and helped support the Home and School for the Blind, as well as our Orphanages in Jersey City and Englewood Cliffs.

Although I wanted to be a teacher with all my heart, I was cautioned to be ready for whatever God's Will presented to me, as understood by my superiors. I memorized and recited daily, the Ignatian prayer, "Take, Lord, and receive my life, my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will," brave words which after a lifetime, I still find difficult to put into practice. The distance is far between the head and the heart!

During our final Retreat before taking First Vows, we were each given some private time with the Mother General. In our day it was Rev. Mother Patricia Moran, a lady in whom I had great confidence. On our knees (as an outward sign of inward humility) we asked to make Temporary vows, and received the black veil which would distinguish us as Professed Sisters. At this interview we had a chance to make known any difficulties



or change of heart which we might have been experiencing, but if all went well, we would then receive our first ministry assignment.

I was shaking with trepidation and excitement, but Rev. Mother did not keep me long in suspense. In her usual rather nasal Irish accent she said, in her inimitable and much mimicked way, "I say now; dear, we are sending you to teach at St. Anne Grade School, in Fair Lawn. How do you feel about it?"

Needless to say, I was ecstatic! These must have been, by far, the most welcome words I have ever heard in my whole life! I was speechless with awe and gratitude, but no comment was expected. I couldn't wait to get to the Chapel and present my thanks to the Lord. I poured out my gratitude to God for my life, my Community, my ancestors, my teachers, my superiors, and anybody or anything else which may have brought about this glorious decision. Then I sought out my friends, and we found that four of us were heading in the direction. Srs. Joanne, Marguerite and Claire and myself were all assigned to St. Anne's.

## THERE'S "HOPE FOR THE FLOWERS"

The particular Novitiate group, fourteen in number, of which I was a member received First or Temporary Vows on March 19, 1954. This was the feast of our patron St.. Joseph. My Aunt Bridie and her family came from Connecticut to be with me. I was very proud to be able to tell them of my new assignment. They have been very good to me over the years, especially my cousin Dorothy, her husband Jimmy, and their children, Eileen and Danny. My cousins Jean Baressi and Ed Grant have also been supportive, but it was Dorothy who always took the lead. Both my Aunt Bridie and Dorothy have since gone to Lord, and I miss their goodness and caring. I know that they received their reward as our God is never out done in generosity.

Because we arrived at our place of ministry near the end of the school-year, it was wisely decided that the largest grades would be split, and we would receive twenty students at most. many of the grades had over fifty, so we were lucky to make our first mistakes with the few rather than the many.

In those days, because we were shrouded in serge and starched linen from head to toe, we had the reputation, if not the aura, of being from another planet. This gave us somewhat of an edge over the other teachers, but sometimes an edge is not enough. I made many mistakes but muddled through until June. My school days in Ireland had ill prepared for the slick "wit and wisdom" of the American kids of the fifties.

In September, I was again assigned to a seventh grade. This time I received a very bright class. They had been the darlings of every sister and teacher in the school. Now I was in the



"hot" seat. Luckily, the students were the kind who could "teach themselves" and I learned along with them. Our Principal Sr. Jeanne Marie had great patience with me, and I will never forget her forbearance and her support.

After three years at St. Anne's. Fair Lawn, I was assigned, along with two others, to St. Mary's School in Salem, South Jersey. Sr. Margaret Rose, Sr. Regina Agnes and myself were very compatible and looked forward to our new assignment. On arrival there we found that our new superior, Sr. Miriam Jervase, had fallen down the stairs and broken her leg. She was in considerable pain and discomfort for a few weeks, and we were left to fend for ourselves and get acclimated to our new surroundings at our own speed. During that first year, we all laughed and cried alot. Our superior was quite tough and forced me to hone my teaching skills to a much more excellent extent, but she had a great sense of humor and was a wonderful mimic.

St. Mary's was a small school of less than four hundred students. We knew everyone and everyone knew us. At St. Anne's we had almost eighteen hundred students, with at least three classes for each grade. Although we had three or four different lunch schedules, the playground space was never adequate, and supervision was a nightmare. In Salem things were much simpler.

I taught the fourth grade during my first year in South Jersey and took Saturday classes at an extension of Villa Nova at Callahan High School in Philadelphia to continue my own education. It was during that year of teaching that I gathered all the information I had never known about the State of New Jersey. My students were taking Social Studies and Science for the first time and were consequently highly motivated.

During the course of the year, I asked that each child bring in a Science Project related to the material we were currently

studying. One student, Alvin by name, brought in what looked like an inoffensive fuzzy ball. He explained to me and to the class that this was a cocoon and that, left on the window sill, it would mature and one day become a butterfly. Since I liked butterflies, I was looking forward to the "blessed" event!

One Monday morning, however, as I entered my classroom to get some notes on the board before the students arrived, I realized that I was not alone. I refused to give the presence much attention, but it would not be denied. I was besieged and assaulted from all sides by a host of buzzing, green, spindly creatures, the like of which I had never seen before. They were everywhere and there seemed to be thousands of them! Worse still, they acted as if they were seeking their only true home in the many wrinkles and folds of my habit, and especially in my headpiece. As I tried to defend myself with a large notebook, the bell rang, and at this inopportune moment the students entered the classroom. Alvin ran to me shouting, "No Sister, don't touch them! They are praying mantises, and it's a sin to kill them!"

"What, not even in self-defence? They attacked me first!" I said. It was only then that I associated the invaders with Alvin's fuzz-ball. With whatever remaining shread of dignity I had left, I told Alvin to take care of them, since they were his project. We opened all the windows (thank goodness there was a whole row of them) and with one hundred percent class participation, we tried to show these newly born creatures of the universe that they would be better off in some other locale. Alvin was not too pleased with this highly undignified treatment of his Science project, but he did get some credit for the presentation thereof. I never did have the humility to ask him whether he had brought in said fuzz-ball as a prank, knowing that something like this could happen, or whether he was as surprized as I was at its outcome. He probably thought he would be present when they finished their hatching period and he would tell us all about their birthing process. Sorry Alvin!



For the next few Years in Salem, I had double grades. One year I had fifth and sixth and the next year, seventh and eighth. they were not large classes, about thirty students in all, but it was a bit tricky, especially with the preparation. There must have been some duplication of material for the students, as I have been in contact with one of them, Pat Peteron, and she has told me that the reason she had majored in History in college and is teaching Social Studies today, is because she had the Greeks two years in a row and grew to like them very much. Praise the Lord, who can write straight with crooked lines! It didn't seem to have done her any harm, as she is a very successful Catholic School Teacher today.

During my last year at St. Mary's we staged some of the parts from that wonderful musical "The King and I". I can still remember with some pride the students' rendition of "Getting to Know You", "Shall We Dance?" and a few others, the names of which I forget at the moment. I, myself, made and decorated a whole mural as the background scenery. The production was for the P.T.A. and, in their eyes, it was a huge success.

I taught Junior High for a few more years, and then when I was just about ready for a new challenge, my superiors assigned me to St. Genevieve High School in Van Nuys, California. I was delighted!

## INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER ... CALIFORNIA, HERE I COME!

With Srs. Irene, Donna and Angelica, I took my first plane flight. As I flew across the United States from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it seemed as if the words of "America the Beautiful" were coming alive beneath us. It was fantastic, awesome and faith-stretching as we wove in and out, above and around the swirling, curling white clouds. I do not recall in any kind of detail the scenery which was spread beneath us, but I do recall being profoundly impressed by the ever-changing beauty of it all. It was truly a religious experience.

This was in late August, 1961, and the ride from the airport in Los Angeles to our convent in Van Nuys was somewhat of an anti-climax. The grass looked coarse and parched, and the poor skinny palm trees looked like mops on the top of a broom handle. The convent and school had been rather recently built and were quite pretty and comfortable, but the heat was brutal! We were still rigidly encased in black serge and white plastic and starch which did not add our comfort or mobility.

Because I had received good grades in French in St. Joseph Presentation Secondary School in Caherciveen, and had done very well in a summer school session with Sr. Michael at Englewood Cliffs, I was assigned to teach French III to a very sophisticated group of Californian Senior. Worse still, I was replacing Sr. Beatrice, who was an experienced French teacher with an accent acquired at a first class, totally French-speaking college in New England. the result was disaster. My French and my Gaelic became mixed together in my head, and let me say that the accent which emitted from my lips had but slight resemblance to the French spoken along the Champs-Elysees in Paris.



Humiliating as it was, I had to agree that there was no alternative but to be relieved and replaced. I was given two extra classes of French II, and, with the help of languages tapes and the excellent text entitled Ecouter et Parler, I did very well. I was also teaching Algebra II class to Sophomore athletes who had more interest in athletics than in Algebra. That almost became my Waterloo, but we all survived the year, and the next year the Algebra was replaced by a Religion class dealing with the sacraments, and here I had much better success.

## BACK HOME . . . . . AND AWAY AGAIN!

In 1964, fourteen years after I entered the Convent, our group was due their first holiday home. We were given the choice of going by plane or boat. They say that "the joy is in the journey", but I knew I did not have the patience to spend eight days cruising home. I couldn't wait! I chose to go by air, as did most of the group. There were five of us on the same plane, Srs. Elizabeth Mullen, Claire Tynan, Deborah Lynch, and Bridget Sheehy and myself. It seemed like an endless journey, but we changed seats and visited and met some nice new friends.

As the green fields of our homeland came into sight, our hearts swelled with joy, and with one accord the words of the poet came to our lips, "Oh, Ireland, isn't it grand you look, like a bride in her rich adorning!" and with all the pent up love and emotion of fourteen years of exile, we bid her "the top of the morning!" Although these were pre-Vatican days when tears were supposed to be suppressed rather than encouraged, we allowed the tears to flow, and sobbed like babies from sheer joy!

Our families were all there to meet us at Shannon. They had become acquainted with one another as they waited. The older ones didn't seem to have changed much. John Joe looked much the same. Katie had become more care-worn from bringing up six children. Her voice seemed a little hoarse, but this was because she was recovering from a bad summer cold. My youngest brother Denis had changed tremendously. He had been no more than a child of fifteen when I left and now he was nearly thirty. He had become tall and broad-shouldered, was a little prematurely grey, and had married a very pretty wife, Teresa Kelly. They had three lovely children, Maire, David, and Eilis. My brother Dave had put on a little weight and was slightly bald. My sisters Breda and Eileen and



my brother Michael lived in England. I would have to wait until later in the summer to catch up with them. My mother was now nearly eighty. She no longer felt capable of navigating the ferry-boat, and waited at home. She had shrunken to a fraction of her former five foot ten, but she was still alert and warmly welcoming.

Some of the neighbors visited that evening to welcome home, each one shyly stuffing a five pound or a few shilling bills into my hand before they left. It felt so good to be back among my own people once more. Exhausted but content, I was finally able to drop into bed in the small room off the kitchen.

As yet they did not have an automobile of their own at Coromore. For Sunday Mass, John Joe fixed a neat little seat with cushions at the back of the tractor. it was quite comfortable despite the fact that my long robes and flowing black veil picked up the brisk sea-breeze which almost carried me off on its own.

After Mass, outside the Church, I felt like some kind of shrine or holy icon. Neighbors young and old came to welcome and pay homage to my supposed sanctity. I was kissed and blessed and prayed over, and regardless of my resistance, the pound notes and the fivers continues to be pushed into my hands, my pockets, and the fold of my habit. I was able to



*My nieces and nephews which I met for the first time in 1964 Mary Ann Lyne, Joe Lynch, Nealie Lyne, Eilish Lynch and Mary O'Neill (neighbour).*

use that money to go to Lourdes that summer. I just hope that I remember to pray for these good and wonderful people among whom I had grown up, and who now showed such warm friendship and reverence. Of course, I knew that some of the homage and graciousness was because of what I represented, our Faith, the Church, Religious life, and the Missionary Spirit. I enjoyed and appreciated it just the same. "Thank you, and up Valentia! where and every time and in every way!"

After I had spent a few weeks at home in Valentia, and had visited friends, neighbors and relatives in the island and around Ballycarbery and the Caherciveen area, I had drunk thousands of cups of tea, eaten several dozen raisin scones, and hundreds of slices of barm-brack and porter-cake. Then I had a yen to see some of the many parts of Ireland that I had never seen but of which I had heard glowing accounts. My sister Eileen and her husband Tom had come by car from England. They had wisely left their two children, Maureen and



*A visit to Clare in 1964 to see an old friend from the office, Claire Brodie*

Michael, with Tom's relatives in Rush, as the journey down to, Kerry is not an easy one for children. They picked up my wonderful Auntie Nell at Ballybunion and after another week at Coromore, the four of us set out on a grand tour of Kerry, and up into Clare where we visited Claire Broodie, an office friend who was married and now lived in Ennis.



We spent a week in Dublin, visiting Denis and his family. The baby Eilis was about nine months old. I still remember how she gurgled in her pram. She was the prettiest and happiest baby I had ever seen. I had a brief reunion with some of the office crowd who still in S.E.S.O. or married close by. I had pictures taken with Mary Sweeney, Margie Mulvihille, Kate Parkes, Maude Perdisat, and Sheila Mullane. They were thrilled and delighted to see me. Then, after we picked up the children at Rush, we were off to Birmingham, via Dun Laoghaire car-ferry and Hollyhead. While in Birmingham I visited the famous Bull-Ring Shopping Center and outdoor market. Birmingham City-Center and its environs have been built up tremendously since then, but the Bull-Ring market area remains very much the same.

After a few days in Courtney Road, Michael came from London and picked up Maureen and myself to take us to London to see my sister Breda who was by this time was crippled with arthritis. She had two children, Christopher and Maria. She was doing her best to cope, but because of the pain she was sometimes a little impatient.

During the first day of my visit while in the house, I removed my headpiece and long veil, and wore instead a type of house-bonnet, because the weather was very warm and humid. My sister was very careful in spreading out the veil, flat on her bed so that it would not become wrinkled or crushed. However, when I went to retrieve it, we found that my two young nieces, Maureen and Maria, had been experimenting, and my plastic forehead-band was cracked straight across the front. I was completely and utterly distraught. I didn't have a replacement and the crushed disaster was not fit to be worn in public. I'm sure I made a complete fool of myself, as I didn't have a clue as to what I could do! I searched my mind for a solution, but could find none. It was my brother Michael who finally came up with a creative suggestion. After examining the strange-looking contraption, he suggested I make something out of a

large white linen handkerchief . Feeling returned to my numbed brain and I remembered that we did indeed make forehead-bands from starched linen at one time, so why not again?

We went back to Michael's place and with the help of his wife Anne's sewing machine, we cut out, hemmed, and later starched a brand new forehead-band which I was proud to wear for the rest of my stay in London. Help comes from the most unlikely places sometimes, but thank God for it! It saved my sanity.

When the time came for my return to the U.S. and the Convent, the neighbors were asking "Are you going back?" and some were whispering, within my hearing, "Do you think she will go back?" This caused me to do a little soul-searching, but not much. With Peter, I would always say, "To whom shall I go, Lord?" To whom, indeed? The Lord still seemed to offer the best options, possibilities, and security benefits. If I could gain for myself and for others a better quality and fullness of life, that's what I was Called to do, and the Religious life seemed to afford the best opportunities to do this. I was convinced that



*Mick Lynch (brother), Anne and their three children, Marian, Jacqueline and Michael*





*My sister Katie with her husband Con Lyne and family John, Nealie, Mary Ann and Patrick.*

this was right for me, so here I would abide, for better or for worse, remembering that He never promised "a rose garden". Recently I read an excerpt from Marynoll's Bishop J. Walsh which helps me to put things into perspective whenever I become discouraged that my gifts are not enough, or when I don't find the kind of appreciation or acceptance I would like or expect.

He writes:

The task of a Missionary is to go to a place  
where he/she is not wanted,  
to sell a pearl whose value  
although of great price,  
is not recognized,  
to people who are determined not to accept it,  
even as a gift. \*2

The prophet Micah states the rules very simply for all of us: when he says: "This is what Yahweh (God) asks of you, only this: - to act justly - to love tenderly - and to walk humbly with your God."  
Micah 6:8

I've noticed that Valentia's homespun wisdom has simplified the rules a little further when they say as a farewell enjoiner, "Be off now, so . . . but be sure you stay between the ditches!" In Valentia, we know all about the "ditches". The roads are very narrow, and not keeping within the ditches (or dykes) can be hazardous to your safety and well-being. In fact you're in deep trouble! These ditches provide perimeters and make our journey safer. So it is with life. We've been given the guidelines and the example by the Lord Himself, and if we stay within these boundaries we will avoid many of the pit-falls along the way, or at least know how to get ourselves back on target, when we do stray.

This "grass-roots" wisdom may well be part of our inheritance from Celtic spirituality which sees to be once more raising its comely head and wholistic presence within our land elsewhere throughout the world.

In late August of 1964, I took off for the U.S. and the next stage of my journey as a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace.

I was buoyed aloft by the hopes and dreams of a new and better world. Pope John XXIII had initiated and convened Vatican Council II. This saintly leader of incomparable wisdom seemed to be about to put the world and especially the Catholic Church back on track. I couldn't wait to learn more about it, and become part of it. The way I felt might be best expressed in the words of an old Shaker folk song which I hope I can remember.

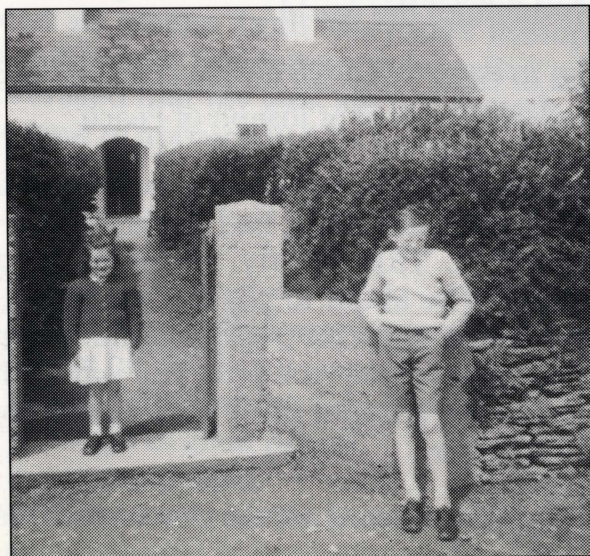
This Second Vatican council would give us the freedom to at least "have a go" at being the kind of human being we wished to become:



'Tis a gift to be simple  
 'Tis a gift to be free  
 'Tis a gift to be come down  
 to where we ought to be.  
 And when we find ourselves  
 in the place just right,  
 'Twill be in the valley  
 of love and delight.

When true simplicity  
 is gained,  
 To bow and to bend,  
 we shan't be ashamed.  
 To turn, turn will be  
 our delight,  
 'Till by turning, turning,  
 we come round right!

I must confess that after many years of "turning, turning",  
 I don't seem to have "come round right. "BUT I'M TRYING"



*The Old Homestead at Coromore with my niece  
 Josephine and nephew Joe Lynch 1964.*

## Sources

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## FOOTNOTE:

I would like to gratefully acknowledge and I deeply appreciate the sponsorship of this production by my sister-in-law Alice Lynch of Clontarf, Dublin and her daughter, Breda.



*My sister Katie Lyne, Breda Lynch (niece), Alice Lynch (Dave's wife) and Teresa Lynch (Denis's wife)  
 1997.*





Valentia Seine Boat (Island Star) at Portmagee Regatta 1997

Bow: Tim Lyne, John Shea    2nd: Pat O'Driscoll, Declan O'Shea, 3rd: Seamus O'Connor, Joe Shea  
4th Patrick O'Connor, Leo Houlihan, 5th John P Murphy, Anthony O'Sullivan    6th Donal Murphy, Con Shea, Cox: Michael Lyne