

The Schoolmaster's Daughter

“O, Margaret you are all the world to me,

A little girl took up a mother's load.

A bright fresh flower to a withered tree,

Showing an aged man the only road.

God bless and keep you forever in his care

O grant together eternal bliss we share.”

(Smyth, Bryan – unpublished poem, 1973)

My father was the local schoolmaster and Principal of Skryne National School for 37 years. Along with his wife, Emily, and his sister in law, Mai Segrave he was instrumental in guiding and teaching hundreds of young children in the parish of Skryne and Rathfeigh during the years 1928 to 1965.

First and foremost he was my father, a teacher, a water diviner, a good friend to many and, in his own wonderful way, a poet. A year before his death in 1974, he penned the above lines for me in gratitude for the wonderful and great relationship we shared over many decades.

I was that “little girl” who “took up a mother's load” and carried out the duties of mother, sister, housekeeper and confidante for many years after my mother died in 1946, at the age of 46, from TB, an all too common illness at the time and regrettably often fatal.

Over the years I have been known by many names; the schoolmaster's daughter, Jim Hayes' wife, Liam Hayes' mother, the little woman, nana, Margaret, and Mags.

I was born on the 11th of December 1932, the year of the Eucharistic Congress in Ireland, when so many were christened Laurie after Cardinal Laurie, the Papal Legate to the Congress.

My mother, a proud woman insisted on calling me Margaret Mary Alacoque after the saint of that name, although I could boast that I was present at the Eucharistic Congress, as my parents travelled to Dublin, by bicycle, to attend it. They made the journey of about 22 miles, to the Phoenix Park, even though my mother was pregnant with me at that time.

Like many others before me, I have lived in an era of great change. In my lifetime I have seen the introduction of electricity, lived through World War II, witnessed the opening of Teilifís Éireann, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the mania of The Beatles, the Second Vatican Council, Mass once said in Latin only but celebrated in English since 1966, and a myriad of other changes.

Some of these changes impacted on the parish of Skryne and Rathfeigh where I grew up, went to school, looked after house and family, got married and raised my own family of five. I often wonder what it would be like if my own dear Dada could return for a day, how shocked he would be, how surprised!

Life has changed so much in Skryne over the years. Once a flourishing town, it is now hardly even deserving of the name of a village. Before 1900 the land of Skryne belonged to the Marwards, a family descended from Sir Thomas Cusack, but from 1880 to 1911 this was owned by the Wilkinsons, who were another English family.

Fairs were held annually in Skryne on land owned by the above families and they continued into the early 20th century. The fairs attracted people from all over the country who were interested in buying and selling cattle, horses and sheep.

As the years passed Skryne lost its status as a town but a community still remained on the Hill of Skryne, beside Skryne Castle, composed mostly of labourers who worked on the local landlord's estate.

There was another community of labourers who worked in Corbalton Hall in the townland of Cookstown. The rest of the community served the estate and

labourers with services and all supplies; there were carpenters, tailors, general merchants and clergymen.

My eldest son, Gerard conducted research on *Population mobility in the Townland of Skryne 1880 – 1911* for his geography thesis while studying for his BA in Maynooth University. In it he quotes from Cogan's History of the Diocese:

'In his three volume work on the "Diocese of Meath" published in 1879, the Reverend A. Cogan finishes off his account of the parish as follows. "After the dissolution of the monasteries the once flourishing town of Skryne gradually died away. In latter years farms have been consolidated the country converted to pasture and the people finding no employment or means of living at home have emigrated so that at present the town of Skryne exists no more, it deserves not even the name of a village."

Little of the land belonged to the people; they worked on the estate as labourers. The rest of the community served the estate and labourers with services and supplies e.g. carpenters, tailors, general merchants and clergymen.' (Hayes, 1981, p3)

I am the third child in a family of nine; four boys and five girls. Ours was a happy home but strict and quite formal unlike the home I live in today. Everything was very regulated and ordered; my mother was a perfectionist.

Washing was a never-ending task, in an era of no washing machines or tumble dryers. The washing took place over several days. The clothes were washed by hand and then put through a blue process to whiten them and then finally starched.

Ironing day was always on a Friday. Clothes were sprinkled with water and the iron, which was filled with a hot block from the range, was used for hours.

As my mother and father were both teaching we always had a housekeeper. I remember some of them very fondly, especially Lizzie Cassidy from Cavan who

got married in 1945, from our house, in the church in Skryne at 8.30 in the morning which was the usual time for weddings back then.

Sunday was a special day. I absolutely loved it. The freedom of having no school, of playing with our cousins, and a special dinner of Sunday roast, followed by scones for tea, still evokes happy memories. We wore our Sunday best to first Mass and returned after second Mass for Religious Instruction which was conducted by my father. All students in the senior classes attended.

The Sunday clothes were so heavily starched that we had to keep our arms outstretched for fear of scratching them on the starched lace around the armholes.

Our daily meals were eaten at regular intervals and we knew exactly what we would have each day for dinner: roast on Sunday, the leftovers on Monday in the form of a shepherd's pie, stew on Tuesday and Wednesday, bacon and cabbage on Thursday, colcannon on Friday and rashers and eggs on Saturday.

Bread was made every day in most houses; brown bread and spotted dick. The same brown bread was our staple diet for lunch each day, with butter and on occasions a piece of cheese. I hated my lunch!

All that was to change during the war years when rationing took place and there was a grave shortage of butter, sugar and tea. Fruit was never available even before the war, except for cooking apples, blackcurrants and gooseberries that were used for jam making.

Anyone with any sized garden at all grew vegetables and enough potatoes to suffice for the whole year; these were kept in a pit in the garden and used when needed.

My fondest memories of home were playing with my brothers and sisters and my cousins who lived beside the football pitch. Games were different then. We played 'babby' house and rounders most summer evenings. Skryne was also blessed with its own tennis club that was just opposite our house; it was a great place to meet friends and socialise.

Life was not all fun and games, however, and everyone was busy and had their own special duties, such as collecting milk in cans from the local farmers, removing the snails from the cabbages, collecting the fruit from the trees for jam which my mother made. Bedtime was early, too early. First there was Rosary and then bed promptly at eight o'clock.

Every evening the filling of the lamps, the cleaning of the globes and the trimming of the wicks was a major job carried out by my father and mother. Then we were ready to face a new night.

School days were completely different from today. We walked to Mass with our Mum and Dad every morning and then crossed the road to the school.

I loved my school days. There were few cars on the roads back then apart from one owned by my father and another one the property of the local grocer, Tom Halligan. So, before school we played hurling and football on the road with abandon assured that no traffic would interrupt us.

My son Gerard - in his thesis referenced earlier - describes the landholding system in Skryne during the 1900's in a chapter about the different families and their position in the parish.

'In 1901 there were 35 dwellings, 18 of these were held by Alice Wilkinson and four by Lady Mowbry. Between them these two families owned nearly all of the townland of Skryne. The rest of the 13 holdings were owned by individuals. T. Halligan and J. Connell also owned their own holdings and they were the general merchant and publican respectively. In the years 1900 to 1911, there was a small decline in the landlord class giving way to the middle class here in the form of the general merchant.' (Hayes, 1981, p12).

During my childhood years, choir was an important feature of school life and my father took great pride in having us ready for the Inspector's visit. There were no musical instruments but he would give us our note with a tuning fork.

One year Skryne defeated all the choirs in the county winning the Feis Cup which was a wonderful achievement for a country school. We entered all the competitions in the Feis and won quite a number of them.

Our dancing teacher, Miss Crean, came every Tuesday to give us lessons and I remember Carmel O'Brien, sister of the legendary Paddy 'Hands' O'Brien, along with Teeny Tobin, winning all before them.

I too was in the winner's enclosure, singing solo and running out through the gates of Páirc Tailteann only to be called back and told I had won first prize. On one occasion when I won, Miss Crean sent word that she was sending a photographer out to Skryne to take my photograph.

Unfortunately, I fell coming out of Skryne Church on that Sunday morning, ending up with a closed eye and a lump on my forehead, and missing my one chance of glory!

Of course there was the downside to school days. There was no electricity, no flush toilets, and no heating in the school apart from one big black stove around which the Master put our milk bottles every morning so as to have them warm for our lunch.

We also used oil lamps on dark days. Before our summer holidays the Sturton family would have a wonderful Sports Day for the whole school on the beautiful grounds of Corbalton Hall and, afterwards, tea and buns were served to everyone. I remember so well Spicers of Navan, the main bakery in the area, delivering pink coconut buns for our tea and what a treat that was!

Of course, everyone walked to and from Corbalton Hall, a round journey of about three miles. Corbalton was like Buckingham Palace to us.

In the wintertime, around Christmas, the Wilkinson family who were originally landlords in the area would treat us by showing us films using a generator. And as each child went in the door to the biggest room in the school they were handed a paper cone filled with sweets.

'The townland of Skryne was dominated by the landlord's estate and most of the population went to work and served on this. But things were changing and room opening up for some who could turn to farming.' (Hayes, 198, p10)

We had few excursions in those days, but on one day tour the whole school was brought to Laytown in two lorries (owned by Packie Mooney and John Connell) filled with stools for the children. We had to stop half way to ask for directions.

Football was our main sport and, once again, it fell to the schoolmaster to train the teams - and the boys of Skryne did us proud. My father was a great football enthusiast and procured the present football field with the agreement of Skryne's Parish Priest, Fr. McManus, after whom the pitch was named.

The end of every pupil's primary school days at that time was marked by the Primary Cert and it was every child's ambition to do well in this national examination. After that we all went our separate ways; to apprenticeships, labouring, office work and a small few to secondary school.

For me, my life was to change utterly at the age of 13 with the death of my mother in 1946. In preparation for becoming the new home keeper after a short spell in secondary school, I spent a year in St. Martha's Domestic School, now the home of St. Stephen's Primary School and Coláiste na Mí.

When I came home to take over the care and running of our home in Skryne I was still 'The Schoolmaster's Daughter', but I was also someone else, and a whole new and different chapter in my life was about to commence.

~Ends~

References:

- Hayes, Gerard (1981) *Population Mobility in the Townland of Skryne 1880-1911*, Undergraduate Thesis. National University of Ireland Maynooth.
- Smyth, Bryan (1973) unpublished poems.