

Two Visits to The Abbey

We were on a family trip to Ireland. My wife and I, my daughter and her husband and two teenage grandsons. The boys, in particular, wanted to visit where I was born in Dublin, where I went to school; and the Wicklow Mountain hideouts where their two great-great-uncles as teenagers like themselves nearly a century ago learnt to drill and fire rifles in preparation for the uprising against the British. Being concerned that they get a more balanced picture of Ireland and its ancient culture, although its fighting for freedom was an important part of its history, so were its music and dance, its poetry and storytellers and especially its playwrights.

I was thinking about all this, seated in the foyer of the famous Abbey, Ireland's national theater, which will celebrate its centenary next year. I was taking a well-earned rest while the family was off shopping in nearby Grafton Street. I was waiting to meet Mairead Delaney the Abbey Archivist. She is an authority on the history of the Abbey and I was interested in learning more about the role the theater played in those fateful days when teenagers were preparing to take on one of the world's mightiest armies. I thought the boys might be interested. There was nothing in the theater bookstore that dealt with the subject but the young man in the box-office thought that the Archivist was just the person I needed. When I protested that I did not want to trouble so important a person as the Archivist at such short notice he assured me "that it would be no trouble at all", if I were prepared to wait until her meeting with students was over. What an opportunity! Of course I'd wait. How generous, but I should not have been so surprised, wasn't I back in Ireland!

teenager myself once again, on my first visit to the Abbey.

Memories

That past and present bind

Embedded

Deeply in my mind

As if 'twere yesterday

Clear

No fading away

A hard bench at the back

Watching, listening

Trying to keep track

A play,

Not comic, but tragic

Words so simple

To me

'Twas pure magic.

Ireland

'Twas seventeen hundred and ninety eight

A nation awaiting its fate,

A family, a fireplace, warmth in a cottage

Parents, a son, and talk of a marriage

Then an old woman in a black cloak

Walks in,

A pause,

Then she spoke

"I'm Kathleen Ni Houlihan, they've stole all me land

Taken by strangers, I've formed a brave band

They've done terrible wrong, sure we must put it right

Come with me Michael and join in the fight"

"Oh ye can't leave like that, Michael me son

You're to be married tomorreh, not die by the gun"

The old woman's cloak falls to the ground

She looks like a queen,

Outside's a great sound

"Sure 'tis Ireland she is"

They cried and they cheered

"Let's drive out the robbers, let's not be afeard"

“Don’t go,” cried the mother,
Michael smiled, and walked out
“Kathleen’s not your bride,
Y’ll be dead, I’ve no doubt”.

Ireland, its freedom
It tried hard to wrench
America had risen
And so had the French
No mercy was shown to those who rebelled
A third revolution was easily quelled
Cornwallis intended a vict’ry to forge
Ireland in chains,
What a present for George!
With mortars and guns and coats that were red
Soon it was over, and thousands were dead

One critic wrote that the play written by Yates, with his love Maude Gonne in the lead as Kathleen, did more for the Irish movement than 100 books and a thousand political speeches.

“You seem to be having a great snooze, sorry to have kept you so long”. It was a young lady, Mairead Delaney, the Abbey Archivist, a Ph.D. graduate in history of National

University. We sat and talked about my memories of the Abbey in the thirties. It was the acting, I thought, that remained so vividly in my mind. Actors stood quite still as they spoke their lines. In the bright spotlight, they turned slightly to the audience, voices melodic and clear, little movement and no word lost. "Yes, it was like the great acting of Greece and Rome" Mairead informed me. "In the early days it brought great attention to the Abbey at home and abroad, especially in the States, But it's all changed now wait 'till you see the play tonight, that's if you are going". I was waiting for the family to return from their shopping before I committed them, especially the boys, to an evening of Irish drama.

We had just driven up from Kerry, probably the most beautiful part of Ireland. My friends the O'Neills owned a pub at the Point, Ireland's most southerly tip which juts out into the Atlantic pointing the way to America, the direction taken by so many Irish over the centuries. Off-shore was the tiny Sherkin Island with its sub-tropical climate brought by the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. We found an old disused slate mine, like a huge grey grotto cut into the mountainside. Exploring inside we found the floor covered with sheets of blue slate. The slate quality was so excellent that it was used to roof

Westminster and many of the great English houses of the past. Andrew and Jonathan were not sure if all this were not some Grandpa blarney, especially when I told them I used a slate in my earliest Dublin school days. I demonstrated how to write on slate using a slate shard. Some difference between this and the word processors they now use.

"Do you have six good seats together for to-night's performance?" I asked the helpful man in the box office. The family all had agreed to go, I suspect largely to please me.

"Sorry, I would have to scatter you around like currants in a cake. Unless of course you

wouldn't all mind sitting in the front row." The play, "Translations" was by Ireland's greatest living playwright, Brian Friel. It is considered by many to be his greatest play, which my wife and I had already seen twice in the States. To see it acted by the Abbey players, even from the front row, would be something not to be missed. Before he would allow us to buy the tickets he insisted that we should try out the seats. He locked his office, opened the auditorium, switched on the lights and led us to the front row. We thought they were perfect. Back in his office he paused and politely inquired "You and your lady look as if you might be seniors? That will be five punt each (a little over five dollars each)". And so began a memorable second visit to the Abbey.

Ireland 1834, the interior of an old disused hay barn, in Baile Beag, in the Irish speaking west of Ireland. It was a hedge school. A secret place hidden from the authorities because subjects were taught in Irish the native language, Irish history with a strong nationalist bent, and the classics especially Plato and Cicero in Latin propounding the virtues of reason and democracy in grand oratorical style. It was St. Patrick who introduced Latin into Ireland in the fifth century and it has remained deeply rooted ever since, though mainly in prayer. The pupils were a mixed bag of young and old, gathered after work to learn from their teacher, an autodidact, likely the worse for wear from too much poteen. All were trying to make sense out of their hard lives, trying to learn a little English, their passport maybe to a better life. The stage gradually filled as the class gathered. Several carried a slate in their hand, an irregular blue grey piece, just as if it had been picked up from the floor of the grotto on Sherkin Island. I looked down the row at the boys who turned to me with big grins on their faces, as they gave grandpa a big thumbs-up sign, it wasn't blarney after all!

In a nearby field camps a company of Red Coats, making the first Ordnance Survey of Ireland, translating local Irish place names as near as possible into their English equivalents. Some of the class, who had a few words of English, reported they were helping in the translations and saw it all as inevitable. The officer in charge was charming and held out hopes that the future looked bright for Ireland if it co-operated. Baile Beag translated into Small Town, or Littleton, if they preferred, what could be more harmless. To others it was all a calculated attempt to obliterate Ireland's past. To cooperate was base treachery. What started as a quiet peaceful theme gradually developed into swirling tragic horror..

From the acting

Greece and Rome had vanished

Dialogue more complex

Kathleen's simple lines now banished

The music still was there

Words flowing at full tilt

The cadence and the lilt

Love for Irish freedom

The flame was fanned

Being taught in Irish

This was banned

Old maps altered, boundaries rearranged

All place names Irish, must be changed

The story line, passionate, intense

Inevitable descent, into violence

And so it was a decade later in 1848 when, after the great famine, Ireland rebelled again, and again it did so in vain. As a child, how I hated Irish history. Ireland never won.

Sixty eight years later, however, there came the final uprising in 1916, which led to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 and eventually the Republic of Ireland..

But the Abbey contributed more than plays to Ireland's fight for freedom. .

On our way out we noticed a small bronze plaque commemorating those members of the Abbey staff who served in the 1916 Easter Rebellion and were killed or imprisoned by the British.

Sean Connolly, actor killed in action attacking Dublin Castle: the famous Abbey actors Barry Fitzgerald and Arthur Shields, fought and imprisoned: also imprisoned Barney Murphy the prompter; Peadar Carey stage hand and brave Helen Maloney usherette imprisoned.

Ireland , now part of the European Union, had extended its citizenship to individuals who had at least one grandparent born in Ireland. This privilege was to expire by the end of the year. Next day Andrew and Johnathan signed up.

So ended an entirely satisfactory vacation.

Editor's note: The bound volume of Club papers in the Literary Club Library, shows the paper "Tony Small" by Dr. Smith as part of the Budget for February 25, 2002. It also shows the paper, "Tony Small," as read on April 29, 2002. However, the minutes for April 29, 2002 show that "Two visits to the Abbey" was read on April 29. It was omitted from the bound volume.

Dr. Smith recently provided "Two Visits to the Abbey" for inclusion in the Club's website.

Jnm

April 26, 2011