

Exploring English in 1960's Monaghan

By Helen Fallon

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My sister started secondary school in 1968, three years before me. She brought home *Exploring English I*, a collection of short stories, mostly by Irish writers, edited by Augustine Martin. On Saturday mornings we took turns reading the stories aloud in the bed we shared.

The stories in *Exploring English* were different from anything I had read before. Unlike the adventures of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, and the stories in the weekly *Bunty* comic, these brought me to a familiar world, with people who lived lives not unlike mine in rural Monaghan. Reading Brian Friel's 'The Potato Gatherers, I felt the numbness of Joe and Philly's fingers and the stiff ache of their stooped backs as the excitement of missing school wore off and the day working for a local farmer progressed. I heard the rattle of the tractor and the heavy thud of potatoes hitting the metal bucket, lead grey like the November sky, and saw rows and rows of potato drills stretching endlessly ahead. I too had watched the short hours of daylight fade, longing for the Saturday's work picking potatoes on a local Protestant farm to be over, when, aged ten or eleven, I would be paid ten shillings.

In another Friel story 'A Man's World' Aunt Rose promises to share a secret with the young narrator, who is on holiday with his aunts in Donegal. He is disappointed when it turns out to be a yellowing letter from a man who once loved her. The boy had hoped for hidden treasure. Rose was regarded as slow, which was a concept I understood, in a world where Asperger's, Autism and Dyslexia were unheard of, and people with learning difficulties did not progress beyond primary school.

The Catholic church featured in a number of the stories as it was central to our lives. In 1971, 91% of the Irish population attended Sunday mass. There was also mass on feast days, fast days, First Fridays and holy days of obligation. Each summer, on the feast of Corpus Christi, we dressed in our Sunday clothes and joined the procession through Ballybay, singing *O Salutaris Hostia* behind a priest holding aloft a golden-rayed monstrance. There was adoration and benediction, when the heady smell of incense hung on the chapel air. Confession, communion, confirmation, extreme unction, plenary indulgences, and the parish missions with fiery Redemptorist priests every three years, were all part of life.

Every summer we piled into the family car and made a day pilgrimage to Knock in

county Mayo, the site of an apparition of Our Lady, St. Joseph and St. John the Evangelist, in 1879. I loved the colourful stalls outside the chapel gates selling blue plastic holy water fonts, brown and green scapulars, rosary beads, shiny miraculous medals, gold ten commandment bracelets that glittered for at least a week, and prayer cards to a vast range of saints.

Against this background of religious fervour, I understood Jackie's trepidation in the dark confession box in Frank O'Connor's story 'First Confession', and the shame of the narrator in Brendan Behan's 'The Confirmation Suit', forced to wear a coat with buttons and lapels, made for him by Miss McCann, a dressmaker and family friend.

Mary Lavin was the only Irish woman writer in the collection. A number of Irish writers including Edna O'Brien and Kate O'Brien were banned at that time, under the Censorship of Publications Act 1929. In 1966, when I was eight years old, Edna O'Brien came to Dublin bringing copies of her first five novels. These were promptly seized by customs officials. I overheard my mother and her friend, who was from Clare, O'Brien's home county, talking about how the local priest burned her book, *The Country Girls*, in the town square.

Lavin's 'The Widow's Son' tells the story of Packy and his mother. They lived at the bottom of a steep hill where she grazed her single cow by the roadside. I saw it clearly - a narrow road with hedges that spilled blackberries in autumn, enclosing fields choked with rushes, where gorse exploded in a blaze of yellow in summer. I cycled these laneways, delivering the *Africa* and *Far East* magazines. The clatter of my bike would alert the dog to my arrival. Barking brought out a woman, sometimes a man, who perhaps had a brother or a sister, an uncle or a cousin on the missions, as half of all priests ordained in Ireland in the early 1960s left for service overseas.

Following a dispute with his mother Packy leaves home, never to return, sending money to her regularly. Maybe he went to England, like so many young men and women from our parish. Our local priest, on one of his periodic visits to the school (parish priests managed Catholic primary schools), asked us to make a promise that we would not go to England before the age of twenty-one. From his exhortation I concluded that England was a sinister, dangerous place.

Then there were the nuns excited by the annual trip to the seaside in Michael McLaverty's 'The road to the Shore'. Three of my father's sisters become Mercy nuns in the 1940's. One went to California to teach. The two who remained in Ireland holidayed in Rosses Point each summer. The nun in America returned home every three years. She had to pray at certain times. We children watched her from the kitchen window - a veiled woman in a long black habit that almost touched the ground - walking between the barn and the fields, saying her daily office. Later she sent a gift of a

transistor radio and we enjoyed listening to pop music on Radio Luxemburg.

The sixties was the showband era in Ireland. Bands went to England for the six weeks of Lent, as the Catholic church forbade dancing in this time of penance. Dance halls were used for plays, performed by frequently excellent local amateur drama groups. My early experience of drama in these drafty halls, were John B. Keane's *Many Young Men of Twenty* and Bryan McMahon's *The Bugle in the Blood*.

In 1967, when I was nine, we got a television set. This opened up the world and indeed beyond to us, as two years later we saw the moon landing. The evening news brought images of civil rights marches and increasing unrest in Northern Ireland. Because my parents came from Cork and Roscommon, we felt more removed from all of this than many of our neighbours, who had relatives across the border.

In 1971, aged thirteen, I left the two-roomed primary school, with forty pupils and outside toilets, to attend St Louis Convent in Monaghan town, thirteen miles from home. Free secondary school education was introduced in Ireland in 1967. With seven children to educate, this was a bonus for my parents. My teachers were a mix of nuns and lay teachers, reflecting the significant decline, from the mid-sixties, in the number of Irish people entering religious life. We gathered in the assembly hall each morning to pray, five hundred girls in wine uniforms, with our teachers. We also said a prayer at the start of most classes, often in the Irish language.

At school there was silence around events in Northern Ireland. The border was about ten miles from Monaghan town. When the town was bombed in May 1974, we prayed at assembly for those who had died. Among them was the mother of one of our fellow pupils. After assembly we proceeded to our classroom to continue our school day as normal.

Further Reading

Mary E. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society 1957-1973*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

O'Toole, Fintan. *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Ireland since 1958* (London: Head of Zeus Press, 2021)

