

William Gallaher

Born 1942.

Autobiographical life story.

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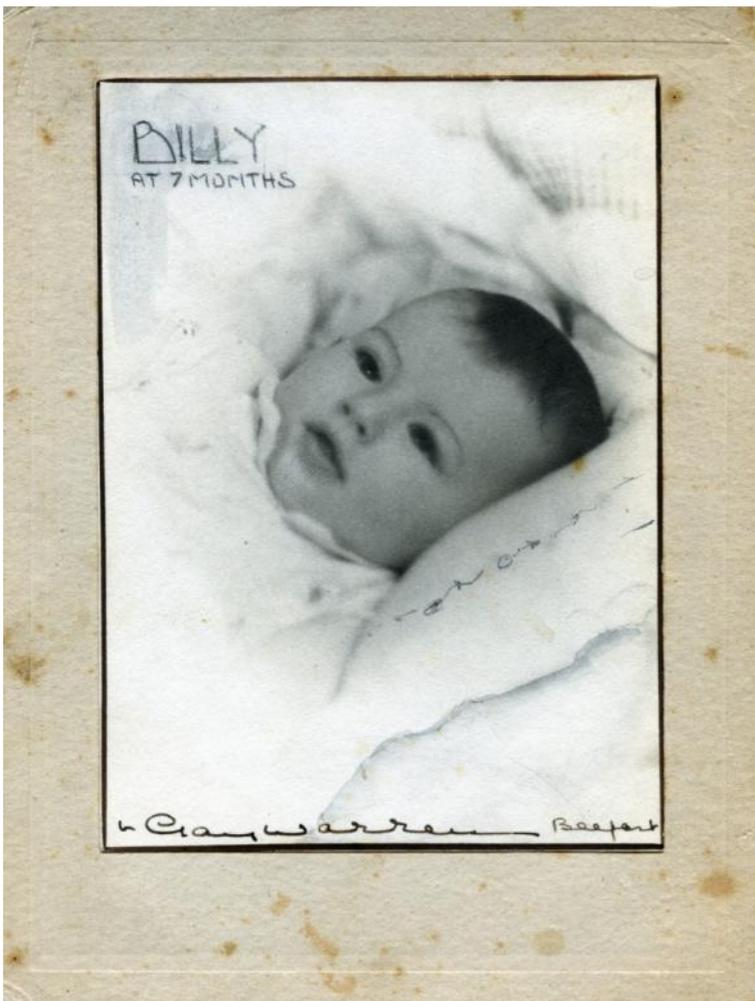
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1. Childhood & Early Life



The wedding of Billy Gallaher's parents.



Billy Gallaher aged 7 months.

Born during the war (rationing), all travel by bicycle, lived in 4 bed semi detached (Galban, Derry Rd, Strabane) (rented) with maid living in. Annie Coyle from St Johnston in Donegal. She was paid 30 shillings a month and worked full day (7 am to bedtime) with ½ day on Thursdays. Part-time gardener paid 1 shilling an hour.

A lot of our clothes were made (cutting up father's overcoats by tailor, having jumpers knitted by Mrs O'Kane - she had 11 children – even vests were knitted.) No heat other than range and a geyser in kitchen for hot water (carried with kettles up to bath). There was an immersion heater but if you forgot to turn it off you burned down the house. There was a turf fire in the sitting room. Although all the other rooms, including bedrooms, had fire places fires were seldom lit in them unless you were sick in bed. I have no memory of fire screens other than in the sitting room.

My father had an old car on blocks in yard, no petrol to drive. Uncle Jim buried a hundred gallon tanks of petrol before the war to be prepared for shortage but never found them again. We had a tea chest full of tea (hoarded) disguised as a pouffe in the children's bedroom as everything was rationed. Ration books allowed 2 oz of sweets a week, an ounce of tea or butter per person. When ration books were withdrawn (about 1949/50) the shops were rushed and cleaned out of everything.

Being born on the border we travelled to Donegal (Lifford) almost daily to buy tea, sugar, sweets. We went on bicycles although only 4/5 year olds as there was no traffic whatsoever. You had to pass through the customs posts, North and South, on each visit but customs men didn't usually bother 4-year-olds on bicycles.

After the war my father bought a car in Dublin (a Ford Prefect ZJ 2012). He couldn't buy it in the North as everything was export only. He had to park the car in Lifford and could only drive it around Donegal then park in Lifford again and walk home (1 mile). A Ford Prefect was the first car with a long bench seat in the front.

It was understood in a small country town that local shops gave credit without documentation. It was also assumed that the householder would pay, eventually when he took the notion. Never would it be alluded to other than an occasional (posted) statement. It was inconceivable that a shopkeeper would ask for money, no matter how stretched the account. Customers were scarce and had to be retained at all costs.

Shopping in Strabane in 1940s/50s was always in a proprietor driven shop. Catholics went to Catholic shops and Protestants went to their own. Sinnamons was a Protestant draper on the main street and when they wanted a new member of staff would put a notice in the window "Assistant wanted, Catholics need not apply". There was little danger they would anyway.

McBrearty's was the grocery store run by Paddy (a decent big man, his funeral had the biggest "offerings" ever heard of in the town (£106). To achieve over £100 was almost unheard of. Annie, his wife was more business like and had to be avoided where possible. You went to the shop counter with your list which he or she took and compiled calling it out as they went "One bag o sugar, one pound o tea, one pound o bacon (had to cut it on the bacon slicer from a huge roll tied with string).

The sugar and tea weighted out and put in blue paper bags as was flour. Butter cut from a slab and shaped by two wooden paddles. It was all “charged up” and put in “the book” which was kept in the shop. There would be a message boy to deliver on his bicycle with a huge iron frame on the front. A message boy’s job was the worst paid – 5 shillings a week and no prospect of promotion ever.

Bobby Fulton delivered the milk in bottles and took away the empties (washed and laid out for him overnight) early every morning, including Sundays. He had a horse and cart until he got a lorry in the late 1940s. He also had buttermilk but nothing else. Cream was not available then but the top of the bottle had 2-3 inches of cream that floated to the top.

The fish man came around with his cart on Fridays and had a “yodel” to announce his coming. His yodel was “fresh herring”. He would have had kippers, cod and whiting also but I never heard of prawns, scallops or mussels. Fish was obligatory on Fridays (“fast days” as they were called, not days of abstinence). Everyone hated fish for this reason and generations of us have never grown out of this. During lent “fast days” proliferated.

Russels bread van, commandeered by Archie Fletcher called to the house every day. He had an electric van that could do 10 miles an hour, except down the hills on Nancy’s Lane where it once reached 25 mph. We were all in it most days as Archie liked company and was liberal with his buns.

Pauline Breslin sold newspapers and her shop smelt of piss. She had a small shop and a piss pot behind a curtain at the back. She also sold the Beano and Dandy and somewhere in the late 40s “The Eagle” emerged. This was mostly “Dan Dare” and space travel. The illustrations from those comics bore a remarkable resemblance to the space ships and space shuttles which appeared 50 years later. I often wonder if they created space travel as a reality.

Beside Strabane was the border into Lifford in Donegal. This was a boom town during the war and up to about 1950. My father had a particular relationship with Jackie Hart who ran a shop from the front of his house. My father was never short of cigarettes even during the war, he smoked 60 a day. The brand of cigarette was anything: Bendigo, Merino, Woodbine, Park Drive, Players, Sweet Afton, Craven A, Passing Clouds, Gold Flake. No cigarettes had filters but Craven A had an end that looked like a filter but was only decoration. It was the cigarette for delicate ladies and men with suede shoes.

Jackie Hart who ran his shop with his big fat wife could neither read nor write. When he would compile your order, weighing out your ¼ pound of bulls’ eyes etc, he would retreat to the kitchen to get his wife to come and calculate the money and give the change. When Mrs Hart died Jackie closed down the shop, gave his black Scotty dog (Judy) to my father to mind for him and was never seen again.

Lifford from being a boom town in the 1940s became a ghost town in the 1950s. The population was only a few hundred and the ambience and maintenance like all Donegal towns then, deplorable. It didn’t evolve from this until the 1990s when the break with sterling and huge price differentials re-emerged between North and South.

School in Strabane was the Convent (5-6 years old) and Barrack Street Boys' Primary (7-14 years old). In Northern Ireland you had to pass the "11 plus" in order to access 2nd level (St Columb's in Derry). The standard of education in Barrack St was poor, with 60 in a class and primitive conditions. The Master held the cane in his hand most of the time as keeping order was a big part of his job. In one year (3rd class 8-9 year olds) there were no desks but benches like choir stalls from high up at the back. We wrote with pencils on fold up jotters but when we had desks used pen (to be dipped) and ink (from the inkwell on the desk). Less than 5% of our boys passed the 11 plus whereas 60-70% of Protestant boys succeeded. We were always told it was a fix but in retrospect I think Catholics wanted to be martyrs and even sacrificed our own in pursuit of this.

The one major class was Catechism and often the local priest would come to hear the progress. Fr Hearne was tall, grey and ghostly (and possibly quite mad?). He was reputed to go to the picture queue on Sunday nights (second house) and pull his parishioners out of the queue with the end of his umbrella and send them to Devotions. What is remarkable about this is, if it is true, is that people would heed what he said and go. Going to late film on a Sunday night was sinful.

In school Chapter 24 of the Derry Diocesan Catechism concerned "The Capital or Deadly Sins" (i.e. pride, covetousness, lust, gluttony, envy, anger, and sloth) with a fully incomprehensible explanation thereafter. Mr McWilliams announced one Friday that we would be doing next week and anyone who got a wrong answer on Monday would get 2 of the best, on Tuesday 4 of the best, and so on to Friday where 10 of the best would be administered. There was one chap (Donkey Doherty) sitting at the back of the class for as long as anyone could remember. Donkey would not know these answers yet if he were asked, so he got 10 of the best. It was quite pointless hitting Donkey, he didn't even seem to notice. (He was called Donkey because his two ears stuck out, straight.)

The rest of us in 3rd class were terrified and even if we knew the answers couldn't give them out for fear.

An example of some catechism's answers is :

Question: "Who is excused from attending Mass on Sunday?"

Answer: "Sick people, women with child and old people with a languishing constitution."

In the house Paul (eldest) and myself always shared bed, sisters still in cots and maid had own room. Large brown blankets/cloths were draped over windows to make room dark and make us sleep. Entertainment was the wireless that farted more than spoke but I can remember "The Billy Cotton Bandshow"; "Take Your Pick"; "Dick Barton Special Agent" and my mother listening to "Max Jaffa" on a Sunday night. In the cinema the films came by rail in large metal boxes and changed every 2 days. On Thursday nights you had the serials: "Tarzan the Apeman"; "Tarzan and Jane"; "Superman" and some chap with a club foot who would shoot you if he got you. There was "Jungle Girl" who had a habit of falling into a pit of snakes just at the final minutes each Thursday. This ensured your attendance again next week. Similarly of course Superman was assaulted with Krypton and Tarzan didn't see the lion about to take his arse off. The main films

were often cowboys (Roy Rogers and Trigger; John Wayne; Gene Autrey and Billy the Kid). Conversation in the school yard often centred around the Thursday serialisation.

Holiday times were greatly looked forward to but strangely little remains in my memory other than the tennis club, cycling around the place for no apparent reason and cricket on the lawn. Memory suggests a time of indolence.

Cricket on the lawn was a significant activity although I was no good at it. We lived in a large house up on a hill behind a shirt factory and we owned 16 cottages (2 up, 2 down, outside toilets) behind that. The rent from the tenants of these was three shillings and sixpence a week. My father didn't like neighbours and had the houses condemned and knocked down. It took several years to achieve this empty site and we spent long hours among the rubble of the empty houses, building sheds with old doors, lighting fires and cooking spuds in the embers. The remaining residents should have disliked all this but I am unaware of any complaint ever being made. These cottages were the 1950s equivalent of the ghost estates of 2010 in reverse.

When the site had been cleared my father made our garden and the vacant site into a cricket pitch. It was probably 40/50 yards long by 30 yards wide. If you hit the ball over the neighbour's wall you were "out". Friends from school and the town would play regularly, usually about 6 or 8 people, no girls and few Protestants. At that time Protestants didn't play games on a Sunday and the playgrounds of Strabane were chained up accordingly. I remember no refreshments being available other than perhaps an odd bottle of lemonade. Also remarkably we had no protection like pads, boxes, gloves. Protective hats of course were unheard of then.

We did play golf sporadically but the golf club never seemed a "warm house" for young people. There was a snooker table there but we hardly used it. Television was just beginning and the golf club TV was accessed to watch the cricket tests from England. They would only show an hour's cricket at a time on TV but this was when Radio Éireann closed down for the morning (10 – 12), the afternoons (2.30 – 5 p.m.) and didn't broadcast after 11 o'clock at night.

We used all have bicycles and did trips to "Moorlough" (a lake up in the hills about 8 miles away) or to Baronscourt Desmene. That was the home of The Duke of Abercorn and he had an enormous wooded estate (perhaps 4000 acres) and a very elaborate garden. We used to dodge about the garden with no apparent purpose in mind. We had a problem gaining access to same and could only be sure of entry if we had Mervyn Reid in his boy scout uniform with us (i.e. A Protestant). The gate keeper didn't take kindly to a bunch of boys from the town unless someone responsible was with us. Mervyn was younger than us and we didn't particularly like him.

Television came about 1954 and we had black and white 12 inch screen. There was one channel only (BBC) and you watched it regardless of content. I can remember Charley Drake, a comedian, whose joke seemed to be falling out of doors. Éamonn Andrews did "Question Time" and had guests like Barbara Kelly, Gilbert Harding, Dame something or other and Lord something else. We sat in the sitting room at a

blazing fire watching all this and were fully satisfied. Television closed down at about 11 p.m. and only started about 5 p.m. in the evenings. The Lone Ranger and Silver were prominent with his partner Tonto the Indian scout. He was obviously a traitor as they spent their time tracking down the “bad guys” who were invariably Red Indians. They were also invariably shot dead. There were no trials, if you were a Red Indian you were guilty.

The wireless then had wires and an aerial and the reception was poor. The wireless would hiss and fart, out of any 30 minutes programme you would definitely miss 10 – 15%. I remember the whole family huddled around the wireless one night listening to the play “Rebecca”. My father thought it was too frightening for us with a house burning down in the play. As it turned out the reception was so bad that night we hardly got the full story. (This would have been about 1949/50.)

Television reception was similar to the wireless in the early days added to which we had no idea how to tune the picture. It would roll, cut in half, snow or simply not work. As televisions cost €50 at that time only some people had them and a lot of people rented them (as a form of guarantee that the bloody thing would work).

My hero in life was my uncle James, a brother of my mother. He drove a lorry in his father’s potato business although he would go on to inherit a substantial portion of it. James was only interested in driving the lorry and drinking in any pub he managed to stop at, and there were quite a few. I never saw James drunk in my life although he got through a large percentage of his life in pubs. Neither did it impede his driving, ever. Somehow drink driving was not considered in those days.

In 1954 I was bundled off to boarding school in Castleknock in Dublin. The choice of school was determined by the fact that I failed the 11+ thereby disqualifying myself from secondary schooling in the North. My parents discussed in detail the school we should go to with a dreadful alcoholic priest from Donegal who called regularly to our house. His visit was usually for Drink and often he had to stay the night being incapable of getting home. He also suffered from scruples and while saying Mass could easily get stuck for prolonged periods especially as he approached the Consecration. At that time priests were held in such awe so, no matter how dysfunctional, were treated with respect and reverence. Latterly when he became increasingly unbearable my parents, if they observed his approach, met him as they were going out the door with their coats on. They would drive around for hours until they saw his car was gone. If we were stuck in the house with this huge man he would be looking for drink but we would make him tea.

Going to Castleknock was a profound cultural shock for a very small boy (I was the smallest in the school) from Northern Ireland. Northern Catholics had an inbuilt inferiority complex aided and abetted by our dreadful primary education.

The boys in Castleknock were sons of farmers, merchants and professional people from all over the country. It was a very Catholic organisation run by Vincentian priests (17) with perhaps 8 lay teachers. It was a thoroughly good environment for young men of the 1950s. Corporal punishment was meted out regularly for any small misdemeanour including being late for morning prayer (7.15) – 2-4 strikes of the cane on the hand; smoking (4); breaking bounds (6); no homework (2-4); out of

bed (2-4) etc. Punishment was straightforward and without malice, just part of the day's work. In the normal course of events you would expect one or two misdemeanours every week. Always we were sent down to the Dean or the Prefect of Studies (for study related offences) perhaps with a note describing the offence.

Being in a year of about 50 others divided into "A" (good, intelligent, honours pupils) and "B" (the plodders including a couple of hopeless cases who would never ever pass anything). In those days if your parents sent you to Castleknock and paid (€120 per annum) there was no differentiation between any "B" class students. I remember one dyslexic individual who never discovered his problem and another poor chap, son of a very strict barrister, who didn't seem able to cope with any subject.

We were in class together (20/24 in class); in dormitory together (15 to 20 in each, beds divided by pullover curtains); and at the table together (8 to a table) for mealtimes. Everyone had own bed/table place/desk/place in chapel etc dedicated every year. That was how the Dean could monitor anyone missing.



The teenage Billy Gallaher.

Meals in boarding school are basic and some of the delicacies were shepherds' pie (known as shepherds shit); kippers and parsnips on a Friday (the smell pervaded all the buildings for the day); and rhubarb, morning, noon and night in season (they had own vast rhubarb patch). There was a chap Brendan from Killenaule in Tipperary, he loved the shepherds shit because it "repeated" on him for several days (the modern term is heartburn). He used take as much as he could garner from the rest of us and keep it hot under the huge heavy teapot with the convex bottom.

Remarkably Brendan is still alive today as those huge teapots had been in the school in the 1930s when my “uncle” Oliver (Butler) was at school there. Tapioca was another stodgy favourite, stiff, solid with a lump of rhubarb jam on top.

Sport was a big item in the curriculum and the best sportsmen had a certain aura, especially if it was rugby. Everyone had to play rugby at least 3 times a week (Wed, Sat, Sun) no matter how dysfunctional. I remember one frail little boy (my cousin John Gallagher) with two out-turned feet, milk bottle glasses and a bull’s lick toging out regularly and hating every minute of it. Nothing suggests to me even now that it was wrong, just that it was of its time. It did imbue an enthusiasm for sport in us and an interest in certain disciplines that never left us.

Religion was a major factor and we were 100% diligent participants. I don’t remember understanding much about it but back then you participated because hell was a looming certainty if you didn’t. In my memory we were living more in fear of hell than the possibility of heaven. I remember as a 19 year old when everyone was a student (UCD) discussing if it was a sin if you kissed a girl for more than 10 seconds. The answer was in the affirmative and the 5/6 of us agreed about this. This conversation took place in Hatch Hall (Jesuit run residence in Hatch St), personally I was in no doubt whatever that this was in fact correct.



Castleknock boarding school.

The friends made in boarding school are friends for life. There is often a suggestion of homosexuality in this environment and I can honestly say that not alone did I never witness it in any way, I never even heard of it. Obviously 300 boys locked up together can find attraction in others over perhaps a 6 year period, that is simply human nature. Sexual activity was absolutely unheard of. During holiday times, mixing with girls, going to dances etc was just as innocent as boarding school. The thought of looming fire was dissuading and the certainty of it assured. Even thinking about things (breasts) was sinful (we thought), as for putting your hand up a girl’s frock, positively a “reserved sin” in our minds. The morality of the time was unambiguous on this and even the religious I think believed it.

The priests who took care of us were gentlemen, dedicated, diligent and thoroughly wholesome. We owe their memory a great debt.

2. Adolescence & Early Adulthood

Finding a wife was a difficult business for me. I was super-sensitive and a denial hurt greatly. So pre-occupied were we all between the Boys' Club and the flat where we lived, talked, and partied, however innocently. I couldn't be frivolous, didn't drink but spent long periods in pubs. Somehow girls were for a later time. Although there might be a girlfriend from time to time I was too apprehensive to make any progress. No physical relationship was possible as it was "a sin" and we were all fed full of shit. You might get to hold hands and possibly a kiss on the cheek in extenuating circumstances. I don't even remember this "celibacy" being a problem to any of us.

I have no recollection of any of us in the flat ever having a bird sleep over and to the best of my knowledge no one was sexually active.

As an example of that there was one chap who used come in after a date with a dreadful conscience. He on occasion roused someone to say the Rosary with him at 3 a.m. if he was feeling guilty. Whereas it would be normal to think that in fact he had "done the business" I discovered only about 3 years ago when we had his lady of that time to dinner. She is a social worker in Dublin and never married. She explained that she had a client recently who shared his sexual experiences with her and then asked her had she any children. She explained that she never married and never had a full sexual experience.

I have been trying to figure out ever since what was on my friend's conscience. Whatever it was it was certainly trivial, but such was the sexual guilt we carried at the time. There was a phrase "knee to elastic; venial, thereafter; mortal."

When I was perhaps 27/28 I met a girl who was more sexually advanced. She would let you put your hand up her frock. I had never experienced this and the consequences were quite a shock to me. I decided after several bouts of this that perhaps I was in love and suggested marriage. She answered in the affirmative. She was infinitely more experienced than I was even if she had a remarkable fear of pregnancy. Not that there was much chance of pregnancy from the wrestling we performed and there was never even a suggestion of intercourse. This was before any knowledge of contraception, which was quite irrelevant in the prevailing circumstances and particularly in the prevailing conscience. She was an air hostess and had an "old" relationship in America where she flew every 7-10 days. On one of her returns from there she dumped me.

Although she contacted me subsequently to re-ignite "the passion" I had moved on. The experience with this air hostess was liberating and I at least now knew that sexuality is a reciprocal business. (This girl never married and I met her again about a year ago and didn't even recognise her.)

My position on being sent to the Dublin sales office was Gopher. I had to go for the uncle's car and bring it to the door, I had to deliver all the Dublin sales and always have a gallon of paraffin to light the smelly paraffin stoves in the two offices. The big item of the day was to get "the letter" off in the evening post so that it would be in the factory next morning. This was a detailed description of the day's trading

and would consist of between one and perhaps six transactions with a total value of between £20 and £200.

The first year in Dublin I lived with Uncle Jack in his extraordinary house (Baggotrath House) beside Lansdowne Road. He had five acres of a garden and two gate lodges, one at Dodder Bridge and the other on Herbert Road, a long way from the house. He had two full time gardeners, a wife he doted on and a daughter. He drove home for lunch every day. The second year I was in Dublin he moved to 13 Bellevue Avenue in Glenageary, a modest 4 bed semi. He sold Baggotrath for £4,200 after 18 months of prayer and bought Glenageary for £2,600. He was delighted to get £4,200, a good price at the time when no one had money and no property could sell no matter what. That was 1962. He continued to drive home for lunch to Glenageary also, always had a sleep after lunch and got back to the office for 3 pm. He had to write “the letter”.

Phone conversations to Donegal were dodgy, you had to get the operator to get you through and this was both to get a line and also to rouse the Lifford post office to rouse the factory. The telephone number of the factory was Lifford 10. The operator in Lifford would know if Aunt Nellie was in the factory or if she had taken “Rowdy”, her cocker spaniel, for a walk. In the latter circumstance you would ring back in an hour.

Since business was so static and challenges so few I got involved socially in a boys’ club run by Past Castleknock Men in Benburb Street. This was in the model of Belvedere Newsboys and several others and was a place where the boys from Benburb St and Oliver Bond flats could go on selected evenings. This was financed by the Castleknock Pastmen and ran successfully if rudderlessly for many years.

We had no idea of the philosophy of a boys’ club or indeed its purpose, merely a place where boys (aged 12 – 17) came in the evening basically to beat the shit out of each other. The only equipment there was a large type of mattress on the floor, about 12 ft square. They fought on that. There was a boot repair section where they were taught to do the job and perhaps some of the basic woodwork. The one functioning item was a boxing team and this competed well and successfully against the other boys’ clubs in Dublin. There were no girls ever in any of these places, it was as if they didn’t yet exist.

Every summer we held a summer camp for a week. We got the loan of a Bord na Mona camp in Rathangan in Co Kildare. All of us would head to Rathangan for a week and live in billets. These were there to house the Bord na Mona staff when that company was establishing itself and harvesting peat to burn in the turbines around Kildare and Offaly. The premises were primitive and manned by a manager and his young family. We employed an army cook for the week. We travelled to and from Rathangan in our cars, packed 6-8 in each and got there at breakneck speed.

I spent about 10 years in youth work like this and it was there I developed rather than in the Foyle Shirt & Collar Company.

I fancied a bird in Macroom (Cork) just after this, not the most convenient place as I was working in Donegal. She was eldest of a large family (7), both parents dead,

the family being looked after by “Aunt Agnes” from Cork. Aunt Agnes was from the Old School. She took her responsibilities seriously and sat between Mary and me always, even at 3 in the morning. I often wonder why she bothered as it was a well known fact that if you touched anything that “didn’t belong to you” you went straight to Hell (if you died of course). It was 327 miles from Strabane to Macroom, serious work in a Ford Cortina. It wasn’t possible to pursue this relationship on purely inaccessibility grounds.

Fr Fthat he had more girl friends than any man alive. This was true and he was a proeargal O’Connor who used spend regular evenings in the flat was always raising in-depth discussion. His speciality was relationships and he often boasted foundly good influence on everyone. He said one night that we should discuss sex with any girl we took out on the first night. What he meant was communication but I being naïve thought he meant literally what he said.

On the first date with Mary Murphy we went for a walk in the country (to get away from Aunt Agnes) and as an opening gesture I said to Mary “Feargal O’Connor says you should talk about sex on your first date”. That killed the conversation dead. In fact neither of us had any idea what he was talking about, we knew nothing about sex anyway.

I moved out of the uncle’s house in September 1962 and into a flat with four pals, all studying in UCD. This flat existed with all of us coming and going until 1972 at various addresses mostly in Rathmines. Although my formal education stopped at the Leaving Cert the flat environment, all the pals at UCD, contacts constantly visiting, this was a wonderful learning environment. In all, 41 people lived in these flats over 13 the years that I was there. (It continued to exist for a few years after I left.) My education came from these two environments: The Boys’ Club (social and community awareness) and the flat (integrated and tolerant life).

Living in the flat in Dublin, usually 4 or 5 of us was the University of my Life. All the others were at UCD or law school and a constant flow of students and intellectuals passed through. Fr Feargal O’Connor taught in UCD then, Ethics and Politics. Maurice Manning taught in same department as did Philip Pettit (Philosophy) both of whom lived in the flat while studying for their masters’ degrees. The flats were mostly in Rathmines and the population evolved naturally. As someone would leave to work or study there was always a replacement around the corner. This living experience was the greatest advantage I got in life, it was intellectual and educational, we learned tolerance and compromise, it was healthy living and ideal for formation of young people setting out for middle class Ireland. The main lesson for me was the advantage and necessity of getting out of home and surviving. This lesson I have passed on to all my children.

Still involved in youth clubs I went to a weekend conference in Red Island holiday camp in Skerries. It was for the youth leaders from all the Dublin youth clubs. At that time all youth leadership was voluntary, the idea of being paid was ridiculous. We did it because it was our social life, hobby pastime and greatly enjoyed it. There was a whole social scene around youth leadership and it bred a remarkable array of old bachelors. In retrospect it was probably not a great social scene to be

immersed in. (We had no idea what the philosophy behind a youth club was – that didn't seem relevant.)

At the Red Island weekend a young girl that I knew asked me if I could give her a lift home. She was a pretty young girl of 18 and wanted to be left home because her Jesuit uncle from Hong Kong was visiting and she wanted to see him. A week or two after that I encountered her in O'Connell Street. She was on her way into Clery's to buy shoes. She really was a pretty little girl and we had a 30 second chat. When I went home to the flat I told one of the flat mates about this but explained that she was very young (18-19). I thought it inappropriate that I should ask her out. The chap I said this to is now professor of philosophy in Oxford and he said I was quite wrong, I should simply phone her and ask her out. Even budding professors were as innocent as I was. Had he not suggested the correctness of this I am confident I never would have asked her.

I knew she worked in the Geography department in UCD so I phoned her the following day and we made a date. I was thinking a young girl like this will be terrified to go out with an old man like me so I had better bring her where she would be comfortable, we would be mutually engaged, we could chat but it would not be a "heavy scene". I brought her to the dogs in Shelbourne Park.

That was October 1970, we were married in January 1972.

We had no sexual relationship before marriage and on our wedding day one of her married brothers took me aside and told me not to rush sex, to leave it for a day or two until we were both ready.

4. Marriage & Family.



The wedding of Billy and Eithne Gallagher.

We were married in Donnybrook Church on 15th January 1972, spent our first night in a dreadful room, the size of a ballroom in the La Touche hotel in Greystones. It was a cold wet night, a cold vast room with a bed that sank in the middle and a one-bar electric fire. We flew to Austria on a skiing holiday the following day and consummated the marriage that evening after a swim. It was hard work. We learned it all together through life, never read “the manual”, never had experience either before or since and have no idea even today if we are any good at it or not. I do know that we have six children and no accidents ever. Contraception was never either considered or an issue.

The wedding day itself was for family only, about 25 of us. I made a speech and cried all through it. That was in the Glen of the Downs hotel in Wicklow (15th Jan 1972).

We returned from honeymoon on a snowy Sunday, Bloody Sunday in Derry. We were diverted to Shannon and came by a dreadfully cold and slow train into Amiens St station at about 3 a.m on the Monday morning. We had to make our way to the airport in the snow for the car and got into our flat at 39 Mount Merrion Avenue

about 7/8 a.m. We had bought a suite of furniture in the auction rooms on the Quays for £17 (second hand) and a kitchen suite for £80 (brand new).

We have a marriage that worked well in the traditional manner. I went out to work and Eithne made the home.

Family life started on Bloody Monday 1972 (day after Bloody Sunday) at 39 Mount Merrion Avenue. We had rented an unfurnished apartment on the top floor of this very cold and draughty house. It was carpeted (cheaply) and an open fire fireplace. The rooms big and high and impossible to heat. Our furniture consisted of a 3 piece suite bought at auction along the Quays for £17 it was a black/grey flowery moquette affair, neither comfortable nor sprung but adequate. We kept it for 20 years. We had bought a kitchen suite for £80 in Capel Street – table, 4 chairs and a bench. It is still in everyday use and will see us both out. We had a double bed and a fridge both of which have only been changed once since (fridge twice). I had a little Fiat 128 and a business that was young and growing.

Within a year we had a son and heir (Patrick/Sam), it was almost obligatory then to have a child quickly, there might be a suggestion of caution or prevention if otherwise. These latter 2 suggestions were frowned on by Mother Church.

A year later we bought 16 Rowanbyrn in Blackrock for £9,800. We got the maximum mortgage of £7,000 (you were only allowed 70% of purchase price and also the husband's salary was only considered in calculating what repayments would be possible). At that time there was a period of inflation in Ireland and not long after that the rampant inflation period of "Red Richie Ryan". Inflation peaked, brought on by an oil crisis, at 27%.

To get a mortgage was difficult; you needed a long history of saving in one of the building societies and they hated people who were self-employed (they didn't trust their figures). We were at a wedding in Lamb Doyle's and Michael Fingleton was one of the guests. He was running "The Irish Industrial Building Society" in Upper Camden Street. I never left his side and got my mortgage accordingly. Over subsequent years I remortgaged several times and always it took one phone call to Fingleton and the job was done. I was still paying off that bloody mortgage when I eventually retired in 2010 from the tax free element of my pension fund.

When the Irish Industrial was changing its name to The Irish Nationwide I was there in a "packed" audience to support my friend. He has always been most supportive and honourable, he built that building society from nothing to significance before it all blew up in his face.

Eithne more or less gave up work on having Patrick and became a full time mother of immense patience. Her contribution to our marriage would cover perhaps 80% of it; my only job was to earn the money. I went out to work, she ran the house and children.

In 1974 we had Maighréad (The Queen), 1975 Rebecca (Ms World), 1978 Eithne (Superwoman), 1983 Síle (Rosie after The Rose of Tralee), and in 1987 Áine (The Hen). The house was small but we were never cramped even when 3 girls shared the same room (we had 4 small bedrooms). In 1989 we bought the other half of our

semi detached and made the two into one. That was probably the only sensible business decision I ever made and it wasn't about business at all. That house cost us £72,000 and we bought direct from the previous owner who was living abroad and anxious to move "up". We escaped all advertising and auctioneer's fees, saving about £5,000 in the process.

During the 1970's we expanded the family and business in tandem at speed, Eithne had no bother running the house and children and leaving me free to create a business. By 1979 I had a considerable asset and bought a factory in Galway from an Italian crowd, Pancaldi & B. It was one of those "eat your dinner off the floor" clean and efficient places that didn't turn out exactly like that. I invested £176,000 in buying Galway and lost it all in the first year. The factory struggled on until 1987, we did everything to keep it afloat and in particular borrowed from Foir Teoranta, the government "bank of last resort". This was a difficult time for me as the breadwinner facing bankruptcy. Eithne suffered and never showed it, I spent a year in a state of depression but never sought or got help other than from Eithne who had the ability to keep the ship afloat even without water.

The children had been going to a small private school, Avoca and Kingstown preparatory school. The teachers were quaint old ladies who spoke both nicely and kindly. I was paying by post-dated cheques to Eithne's great embarrassment but all the bills were paid and the cheques never bounced. In 1983 this school closed for the last time and the children had to go into the ordinary National School (Hollypark in Foxrock). We discovered after a few months that this was infinitely superior to the private school, the standard and spirit of education simply wonderful.

From national school all gravitated to Newpark Comprehensive, a free, comprehensive, interdenominational, co-educational, Church of Ireland school. Seemingly there was a preference for Church of Ireland students, which our children were not. Our family was always looked on as the "Irish" family there and would be chosen to speak at any Catholic or Irish event. They got a wonderful broad education that has served them greatly in the world they participated in afterwards. They were perfectly at ease in the company of anyone, boys; girls; Jews; Holy Rollers; foreigners; disabled people; black; yellow; Goths; gays.

Again it was Eithne's foresight and energy that got them all through Newpark.

Some years after leaving Newpark young Eithne (Superwoman), living in Romania, had adopted 5 children (all siblings). The eldest of these, Nico, aged 12 when she met Eithne (then 24) had no visible signs of education whatever. Young Eithne decided when Nico was 19 to ask Newpark if they would take Nico into transition year to which they readily agreed and Nico and Newpark had a wonderful success together.

All graduated from Newpark with adequate qualifications, none spectacular. Síle (Rosie) didn't quite get the points she needed for primary school teaching and went to St Laurence's in Loughlinstown to do 7th year. That, to my amazement was spectacularly successful. Being educated in Newpark, living at home (where they all did French exchange at least once), where visitors called incessantly from all over

the world and from all disciplines allowed everyone the ability to think outside the parish.

Eithne the mother was and is the cornerstone of all the family, she wanted nothing and got nothing but seemed comfortable. In latter years she developed her music skills and teaches piano at home. She developed her computer skills and is very efficiently involved in various charities mostly in a secretarial capacity. She cooks and cleans, knits for the grandchildren (10), reads and hikes but never rests. She makes jam and cooks the old way (her recipes) and would never ever buy shop cake, ready made meals, shop jam or any shortcut to the healthy diet.

4. Work & Employment

In 1921 the Gallagher family set up a shirt factory in Lifford (Donegal), having had an involvement in shirt-making in Strabane from about 1888. The Strabane business had petered out, lost by grandfather Paul Gallagher in the late 1920s as he invested in Dunlop shares in the stockmarket all the way from £2 to £12 and back down again to £1. The factory set up in 1921 existed until 1967 and I had an involvement in it for six years, 1961 to 1967. When this factory was established in 1921 it took a couple of years to decide which side of the border it was on. Seemingly with partition there was ambivalence for a time on the exact border positioning. When the border was established it was between the Gallagher residence in Strabane and the factory in Lifford.

The girls (aged 14-17) in the factory in Lifford walked to work (some 4 or 5 miles). The factory had only a pot bellied stove to heat it that had to be lit when the first person came in. It would register little heat until about 10 a.m. There was a two-bar electric fire in the office and a one-bar fire for "Rowdy" the cocker spaniel in a little front room.

Girls started to work at 14 and had to serve a 5 year apprenticeship. In the first year (paid £1-19-1) they would only do menial jobs, cutting threads off shirts, sweeping and cleaning and boiling up the "Burco" boiler. In their second year wages increased to £2-1-3 but on becoming 16 (i.e. 3rd year) they had to stamp a card (i.e. Social Insurance – 4/6 a week) and although their earnings increased the take home went below £2 again. When fully qualified after 5 years the earnings were £6 but this depended on production.

Initially the system was "collective" insofar as the factory had to produce 40 dozen a day and at this everyone got paid. This changed to "piece work" once we had the Max Johnstone system in place. There was a problem with the former system as obviously some jobs are easier than others so half your staff could be gone by 3 p.m. and the others would struggle to finish at 6.00 p.m. (To put a collar on a shirt took 2.15 minutes, to attach sleeves and sides only 1.20 minutes etc.) When the change to piece work was made a person had to produce 480 minutes of work a day (i.e. 60 minutes x 8 hours) but was paid a bonus per minute on anything produced over 480. The best girls would produce 600+ minutes giving them 125%+ pay (i.e. £6.00 + £1.50). If anyone produced 800 minutes it was obvious that the rate of minutes for the job was "loose" and had to be studied (i.e. work study) and reduced.

There was no music in the workplace and talking was forbidden, hence the girls worked very hard for an hour and then went to the toilets for a smoke. The toilets were in a constant smog. Everyone walked home after work, none had cars and only a few had bicycles. The canteen had a couple of bare deal tables and the "Burco". All brought own lunch and there were no facilities to cook anything.

Wages were paid in cash, calculated every Thursday and separate envelopes made out for everyone (a long slow process) containing the pay and very little information.

No one ever complained and when the factory eventually closed everyone cried their eyes out.

Banking was different in the 60s, very much based on trust and reputation. When you made a lodgement the cash was available to you at once although it took 3-4 days for the cheque to find its way back to the drawer. The Foyle had an overdraft of £18,000 that never went down but crept up by £100/200 a year. Bank managers were universally mannerly and discreet.

On the day we decided to close down forever my father I went into the Northern Bank in Strabane and told the teller we were closing down. He wondered why we were telling him. We explained that we owed him a lot of money and hadn't got any. We said we had been trying to come to an agreement with others to take over the business but had failed to do so. My father took a little crumpled note from his top pocket and passed it to the teller and also gave him the key saying "it is your factory now".

My father explained that although we had failed to find a buyer we had a person who was interested but he would only give us £2,950 for the lot (the premises, machinery, stock, work in progress etc) but we owed the bank £18,000. (This is what the crumpled note was about.) The teller said to hold on a minute while he spoke to the manager. When he came back he gave us back the keys and the note and said they would be in touch. So they were, three weeks later.

The crumpled note gave the name of Stephens Bros of London as the people who would like to buy our factory for the aforesaid £2,950. I came to an agreement with them that they would employ me at £20 a week and give me a company car (Ford Cortina). They would give me 20% of the business and I would manage it for them. They honoured part of this deal only as they in turn were "in hock" to Austin Reed of London who effectively took over the business and the management of same leaving me as a salesman only. Whereas I was screwed by this new agreement and the 20% shareholding never materialised I did get permission to sell anywhere in the world on 10% commission.

Austin Reed had a large factory in Omagh (also one that our family established and made a balls of) but it was modern and shambolic, employing 250 people and English management. The English management was most objectionable, they seemed to think they were in the Punjab and treated the staff with derision. They were never comfortable in Ireland nor was Ireland comfortable with them. They carried an enormous stock, enough fabric at all times to last a year and a factory through-put of 12 weeks (I had been achieving one week in Lifford with quick response system).

I saw their enormous fabric stock as my opportunity and in 1969 bought 1500 yards from them to make 350 shirts in the Tee Clothing Co in Frances Street in Dublin. They were happy to sell their fabric and let me do what I liked with it. I had made some money on a deal I did with Ben Dunne (Jr) and paid for the fabric with that.



The shirts got made and Kevin Moore (Mr Gear of Talbot Street) bought them all from me and paid cash. This gave me liquid to buy a new suit, two ties, a large suitcase and a plane ticket to London. Carnaby Street was flying and the King's Road now in full flight. I wanted to find a customer with 5 or 10 shops who could give critical mass to allow me get fabric and production. Some of the people I tried were "Granny Takes a Trip" and "Mother Wouldn't Like It". They were simply crazy, stoned and dangerous. But I found "The Squire Shop" and sold 1000 shirts. I returned to Ireland a hero (January 1970).

Around that customer and 10% commission I built a significant business over the following ten years (1969 – 1979). Every penny re-invested. By 1979 I had 10/12 employees, was getting CMT from The Solo Shirt Co in Ballybofey and selling 200 dozen shirts a week. I was making noise rather than money but had momentum from the constant flow of commission cheque (up to 1977) added to buoyant sales via three reps and myself all around Ireland.

5. Retirement

In 1999 the Gallagher clothing industry died for the last time. It was possible to get a job if “you knew someone who knew someone”. I managed to get a job looking after prisoners after release from prison. The employment was in an agency that carried out this brief on behalf of the Probation Service. The brief was that Probation would present clients “job ready” and we would place them in jobs. Never once in my experience (971 clients) did a “job ready” client appear. There was always a training, addiction, homelessness, family, literacy or whatever problem long before the possibility of work.

Having had the boys’ club experience in the 1960s these clients and this job were easy for me. Never did I find a client I didn’t like, only once was I assaulted and only once was I afraid of the client (he murdered his mother on release). I dealt with murderers and robbers, violent criminals and drunkards. Drug addicts were predominant, using, supplying, selling, storing. A large number of clients were on methadone maintenance (heroin substitute), most clients (60%+) had hepatitis contracted either by sharing needles or sexually. All clients smoked dope/hash/marijuana.

I formed the opinion early on that the fight against drugs was a hopeless one (there was little difference between the world consumption of illegal drugs, tobacco or alcohol except that all of the €200 billion in drugs was illegal). This screwed up the police force, the jails, the criminal justice system, the health service etc. Seemingly this was controlled by UN charter so no country could do a solo run and if they do (Holland) the country becomes the tourist destination of all the drug users in the world. Since there is an insatiable demand the battle was like holding back the sea with a spoon.

It seemed to me that if drugs were taken safely in “medical environments” the instances of quality of merchandise could be controlled and the dangers of contamination avoided. This referred in particular to dirty needles, shooting up in isolated and unhygienic places with dissemination of knowledge and safety. Alcohol use costs society but it does at least contribute somewhat and is legal. I thought the only serious drug was hash in its various forms being used by young people (i.e. under 18s) which seemed to create psychosis and lethargy that often led to suicide.

The criminal community was exclusively working class. I often asked my children, nephews, nieces etc. (aged then 18 to 35) if they knew anyone in prison or if they knew anyone who knew anyone in prison. Never did I get an affirmative.

I formed the opinion (when some Blackrock students were involved in manslaughter after a dance in Annabels) that the criminal justice system is set up by the middle classes to protect themselves from the working classes.

June 2009 I retired willingly but anxious to keep working somehow. I saw this as a health issue. As there is no possibility of a new career, with the focus now on certification and documentation rather than life experience, the only possibility was volunteering.

This opened a whole new world and I took the view that it should be done in different places rather than immersion in one skill. “Volunteering Ireland” had a significant website offering volunteering opportunities. Topical in 2009/10 were foreign gigs of perhaps 6 to 24 months in underdeveloped countries. I preferred local gigs such as working in the “Soup Kitchen” where a lot of the clients I had known would attend. This was run by the Capuchins in Church Street and served 250 lunches a day in 2009. By 2011 this had risen to 500+ lunches a day and 200 breakfasts. They also gave out 900 food parcels once a week (typically milk, bread, butter, tea, sugar, beans, sausages). A large number of foreign nationals accessed the facility by 2011, out of work now, often whole families. There was a medical facility on the premises and a counsellor a few days a week.

I found “Fighting Words”, a facility set up by Roddy Doyle and Seán Love to encourage creative writing to anyone who attended. Very often that was school children in their classes (the whole class would come with their teacher for the day).

There was volunteering with older people, particularly befriending Alzheimer sufferers (Altadore Nursing Home in Glenageary) and I trained up to deliver the “Sonas” programme there. A new initiative by the Health Authority that insisted every patient in an old people’s residence had to have some stimulation in their programme. Sonas in 2011 was becoming an important stimulus programme for severe Alzheimer’s patients. All nursing homes must now show activity and stimulation programmes for all clients and delivery must be fully documented. This was brought about because of some very poor practice highlighted and several facilities being closed down.

I had the view that it would be beneficial to me to have an activity every day, even if only for a few hours. This would keep the energy and brain cells working.

Health to me means mental health, all the rest can deteriorate but if you keep this aspect moving the quality of life is relatively assured.

6. Reflections

Once as a promotional tool I decided to employ someone to write up “Yarns from the Trade”. This was to be stories about some of our customers and how they came to be in the menswear business.

This was inspired by Logan Knott from Boyle, Co Roscommon, who related the story of his apprenticeship in Messrs Good & Co, Sligo, in the 1930s. To serve an apprenticeship to work behind the counter took a deposit of €40 and then to work for no pay for 3 years. If you didn't have the deposit you could negotiate to work for 4 years without pay instead - always at this time “living in” above the shop where Mrs Good would be “your mother” during apprenticeship. The arrangement was that you would live in 7 days a week but get permission to go home after church on a Sunday. You were expected to be back for church on Sunday evening (it was a Presbyterian house).

Apprentices were not permitted to serve customers in their first two years, their jobs were keeping the place swept and clean, hanging the clothing outside the shop front (with the long poles) and tying up the underwear packets for the senior sales personnel. Men's' underwear, long Johns and long sleeved vests, were tied with string in parcels and placed on shelves behind the sales people. All these parcels were tied and folded to fall open as the salesman presented the garments to the customer. They had to be repacked and replaced in exactly the same manner by style and size, ready for the next customer. When the shop got very busy, perhaps late on Saturday night when all the farmers were in town, an apprentice might be asked to “come forward” to serve a customer. This was considered a major challenge.

At night after a day's toil on the shop floor Mr Good would slap the young bums as they filed upstairs, Logan said “to see if there was a rattle of money”. Mr Good would tell them “you men need only 2 pence every week, one for the plate every Sunday morning and one for the plate every Sunday evening”. The only money an apprentice would get was when a commercial traveller came by train. Logan would meet him with the handcart and bring his sample cases to the shop. The traveller would normally give the young assistant a threepenny bit.

Tommy Warner served his time in similar circumstances in JV Kelly's of Newry. Although Tommy was now “out of his time” (i.e. apprenticeship) he was still only 19. The ultimate crime for a salesman was “to take a swop” (i.e. let a customer out without buying). There was a market day in Newry and a customer came to Tommy for a Crombie coat, priced 22/6 (22 shillings and 6d). Although Tommy tried he failed to sell the coat and the customer left the shop. Mr Kelly watched this from his high desk with the glass screen. He at once came to “Mr Warner” to see why the customer had walked out and Tommy had to explain that the customer didn't like the coat. “But Mr Warner, you are employed here to sell the coats” said Mr Kelly. Some time later that day Mr Kelly sent “Mr Warner” down into the market to find the customer and tell him Mr Kelly would like to see him back in the shop. Tommy found the customer and brought him back where Mr Kelly proceeded

to sell the customer the coat. When the customer had left Mr Kelly said to Mr Warner “if that should ever happen again there would be no position for you here”.

There was a man working in Geoghegan’s of Navan and he said he got into the trade because his father was a farmer. As a lad he had to bring the sheep to the market in Athlone, 9 miles away. He had to set out at 2 a.m. to be in a good position in Athlone Market Square by 6 a.m. He stood there all day in the rain, never saw a customer, his only sustenance a bottle of minerals. At 5 p.m. he set off home with his flock. Near his house the sheep took off over the ditch into a wood and it took him 3 hours to round them up again. That was why he got into the menswear business.

In the 1960s the shop assistants in Clery’s were paid about £7 a week but they also had commission of 2d in the pound (i.e. less than 1%, there were 240 pence to a pound). They only started to earn commission after their sales reached £120. A shirt at that time sold for between 7 shillings (7/0) and 22 shillings and 6 pence (22/6) hence £120 could mean 150/200 customers.

Clery’s had 17 senior salesmen in the shirt department and Guiney’s in Talbot St had 10 in theirs. They “sharked” for customers (i.e. grabbed as many customers as they could, serving perhaps 5 or 6 at one time when the salesman beside them had none). There was one old man, Jackie Dooce, in the prime spot in the long counter in Clery’s who could shark and sell more than all the other salesmen in the store. He was hated and abused by his fellow salesmen. He was reputed to be on performance enhancing stimulants during sale time.

The most interesting part of the shirt manufacturing career was the relationship with the Solo Shirt Co. This was run by a big thick farmer, Leonard McGuckan. Leonard had had a heart attack in 1959 and was confined to bed for life. After a year the doctor allowed him get out and sit beside the bed and after another year allowed him walk as far as the kitchen. After a further year Leonard told the doctor to fuck off, he was going back to work on Monday.

Leonard went back and was his own manager thereafter, aided and abetted by Aggie Bonnar, a decidedly undainty lady from half way up a mountain. Leonard was his own cutter, mechanic, van man, accountant etc. His language was equalled only by Aggie’s, his factory wooden and machinery decrepit. He was never connected to the ESB preferring to generate his own electricity, sometimes by connecting his tractor (large blue Ferguson) to his generator to his factory.

Leonard had a Volkswagen van and had 8 wheels for it, 4 bald as eggs for driving about Ballybofey and 4 with treads that he would change into on a Tuesday for the run to Dublin with delivery of the week’s production. Leonard never changed to decimal currency and always increased prices by the same amount (2 shillings a dozen) regardless of the percentage rise in wages. His only obsession in life was paying no tax. The factory inspector would call occasionally and complain that the wage rates were too low. Leonard would answer “they are not doing enough fucking work”. The factory inspector gave up calling after Aggie told him to go and fuck himself.

The biggest item on the agenda for us growing up in the 1940s and 1950s was religion, not so much the love of God and certainly not the love of our neighbour but the avoidance of Hell. In first class (8 year olds) Fr Hearn came in one day to enquire how long we expected to spend in Hell, burning in a white hot furnace, if we died in a state of mortal sin. Someone suggested 100 years, “more” says Fr Hearne, 1000 years, “more”, a million years, “more”, a million squillion billion million billion years, “more, more, more”. The suggestion seemed to be that you had better behave.

We had catechism that we learned by heart under threat of serious physical punishment. We had the annual Mission, fire and brimstone, terrorising any impurity in particular. As far as we knew everything was a sin and we all went to weekly confession accordingly. In confession I had my rhyme, “I told lies, stole and cursed and was disobedient.” My brother was asked what curses he used and he said “5 Fs and 4 Jaysuses.”

I have no recollection of any spiritual intervention in any of the foregoing, nor do I think any of those teaching us ever considered the matter. There didn't seem to be an understanding either among priests, teachers or people that religion was the love and honour of God lived out in the world.
