



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1988**

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**ISSN 0791-0665**

# MIDNIGHT MUSIC ON THE TIPPERARY HILLS

By *Brother Linus McGee*

On Saturday 2 January, 1926, I arrived at Tipperary railway station at 2 p.m. I had a new suit, a new overcoat, a new hat, a new umbrella — and I was desperately lonely.

Brother Kelly was on the platform to meet me. He hailed one Looby, and directed him to convey my trunk on his handcart to the Old Monastery on the Old Road.\* The Brother was wearing a type of hat then just going out of fashion — a velour — and he had an ebony walking-stick, a watch and chain, and narrow-legged trousers with no turn-ups.

He led me by a circuitous route to the place that was to be my home for the next six years, the happiest in my life. It was a soft overcast day, with plenty of limestone mud on the Station Road. Against the shop-fronts in Bridge Street were wooden railings, for it was fair day. We went down Main Street and turned left, up St. Michael Street. Brother Kelly made frequent halts to converse with farmers and drovers. He was in his element discussing cattle prices, for he was of farming stock, and his unit of respectability was the grass of so many cows.

From a butcher's shop came a loud melodious voice. I was introduced to its owner, Johnny Cranley. To my embarrassment he bowed low like a courtier and kissed my hand. I stood aloof, while cattle prices were again discussed.

Brother Kelly showed me the Convent Chapel where (he told me) I would be going to Mass. Then we entered the Hills area, and walked towards the Flats. Inside the Monastery Brother Flynn came along soon, a serious man with grey-brown eyes and a needle stuck in the front of his soutane. The Superior, Brother O'Keeffe, came in next, a tall, sandy-haired man with a slight Australian twang, and lastly Brother Lynam, with keen blue eyes that looked through you. Christmas decorations were still up when I hung my coat on a hook at the foot of the stairs.

In 1926 Tipperary town was still reeling from a variety of body-blows. The sods on the graves of Republicans and Free-Staters were not yet fully knit. Roadside crosses were new, and those they commemorated had been known to all passers-by.

Atop a fence near "Cup-and-Saucer" (one of the hills) was a cross. Here in December 1920 a young man had been "murdered by Crown forces". A married man, he had been taken from his home at night, and his screams as he was done to death had been heard below in the town. A dead robin was found beside his body. So my pupils told me; to them this fact seemed to add pathos and beauty to the tragic event.

On the roadside near Kilfeacle Church another cross marked the spot where two young men were done to death that same Christmas. Beyond the convent grounds on the Kingswell Road, a third cross told of a young man who had died in 1923.

A heap of rusty iron marked the site of Cleeves' factory. The old British military barracks, where Prince Arthur (Queen Victoria's son) had reviewed the garrison of 5,000 in the 1890s, was now a burnt-out shell. So was the present Garda station. The shops felt the loss of the lucrative trade which the garrison had provided. Yet one never heard anyone sighing for the days that were gone for ever. Perhaps people were too bitter or stunned by the events of 1922 and 1923 to think back any further?

\* *Editorial note. The monastery was the name locally given to the Christian Brothers School on the (Old) road from Tipperary to Limerick. Formerly a Famine workhouse, it was demolished a half-century ago.*



There were also many men in that town of the 25 - 40 age group, who had worn the khaki in the First World War. They had marched into terrible horizons of barbed wire and hell-fire on the Western Front. There were even a few veterans who could tell tales of stirring service in the Khyber Pass in India under Queen Victoria.

I shall always remember the humble impromptu sing-song we had in the Monastery the day we gave the Christmas holidays in 1927. Somebody said: "Sir, Johnny Hennessy have a song". He rendered a partisan parody on "Kelly of Killane". Then came other equally partisan songs, some pro-Free State, some Republican. Finally Jamesy Hannon intoned a ballad of the Black-and-Tan war, to the air of "John Brown's Body". All I can remember is one line: "We bombed them out of Cashel, and we bombed them out of Cahir." The boys joined lustily in the chorus, which all knew, banging the desks and tramping their feet.

There was great poverty and much unemployment in Tipperary town in those years. Some of my boys in Infants and First Standards came barefoot, even in mid-winter. One bitterly cold day Father Kelly came in, and saw two boys wearing socks but no shoes. He called me outside, swore me to secrecy and told me to send them and a few others down to a local bootshop.

We went to Mass daily at the Convent of Mercy, half-a-mile to the east. I enjoyed the walk, whether it was in summer weather when we made tracks through the dewy grass as the sun rose over the distant Rock of Cashel, or with collars up-turned, as we skulked along before the driving rain. There were then no houses between the Monastery and Dawson's Villa.

It was a wonderful contrast to come into the chapel out of the rain and darkness. Here everything was peaceful. Only the quiet sighing of the gas-lamps or the occasional ripple of a nun's beads broke the silence. From the sacristy came Father Hennessy's asthmatic cough — which brought him to an untimely grave.

The majority of the parents in Tipperary in my time are now dead. Even though I spent over six years among them, I knew few of them to speak to. Some mothers from the New Road used to come up now and again to enlighten me about the running of a school. From them I learnt one salutary lesson — not to argue back.

I did, however, get to know many of the "characters" in the town. There was a tall man who used to make a short-cut through the Hills during play-time. He used to deliver newspapers to houses in the Bohercrowe area. He looked normal, wore an oil-coat and was generally respectably dressed.

His great affliction, however, was that he was ultra-sensitive about his nickname, "John Bull". Immediately he appeared in the vicinity there would be dead silence, and the atmosphere would become electrified. He would be all ears and eyes for the faintest suggestion of a cat-call. I used to keep close watch, hoping that no boy would give occasion for the storm of abuse that would result from the shout of "Bull" — and yet perversely expecting somebody to transgress!

There was a long-haired itinerant named Mickey Feore, who used to mutter and growl as he went his way. His progress was slow; he considered it a civic duty to hurl all stray stones on the road to one side with his walking-stick. There was also a pedlar woman called Susie Supple, who could always be counted on to render a spirited oration were anybody to shout after her: "Susie Supple sold a couple".

Another common sight was a vendor of fish and rabbits. These he purveyed through the town in his mule's cart; the fish in boxes, the rabbits slung across a bar. If he spied a likely customer he would shout "Whoa" to the mule, which would halt stock-still. Sale made, he would cry "Go 'head agin", and the mule advanced once more.

On one occasion this man halted his mule in St. Michael Street, and accosted that august figure Archdeacon Cotter with the words: "Skin you a pair, your Reverence?" The expression



became a cant-word in the town for long afterwards, the idea of challenging the archdeacon to purchase a couple of rabbits being a source of great amusement to the townsfolk.

I remember too a sign painter who plied his trade in the New Road. Charley Coops was over seventy, but despite his years he was able to perform the most difficult riding-stunts on a bicycle in Pat McGrath's sports-field when a sports or feis gave him the opportunity. Also in the town then was a genial middle-aged bachelor who taught outside the town. He had the "little failing" of many soft-hearted men — for which all loved him the more. It was a delight to listen to his flawless Irish in his native Kerry dialect and accent.

Occasionally still in the darkness of the small hours I wake up for a moment or two. At such times I always believe myself to be in bed in a room high up in the old Monastery. Yet that bed no longer exists; the third-storey room no longer exists; and of the Monastery there remains not a stone upon a stone. In my dreams I make my way across the Hills, past Mutton Pie and the Flat and the Bull Hollow, passing then through the V in the graveyard wall. At the first headstone ("Erected by Willie Thompson to his Mother") I turn right and go down the Triangle.

I said "Goodbye" to Tipperary town on 15 August 1932. In my days there an elderly man used to give music lessons. I often saw him returning on his motor-cycle from Limerick in the evenings, where he conducted classes. Two tall oblong cases fixed on either side of his machine held his instruments. He loved music, had it in his finger-tips and in his very soul.

What wonder then that, long after the town-hall clock had proclaimed the hour of midnight and Delaney the town-crier had finished calling out "One o'clock and All's Well", the musician would pace the long summit of the ridge which ends at Mutton Pie. There, high above the slumbering town, he would play on his pipes under the stars.

I am sure he has long since gone to join another choir. Is there anybody today in "Tipp town" who, like me, had the privilege of hearing him make his violin talk up on the Hills? Here where I am retired, under the slopes of Divis and the Black Mountain in Antrim, I can hear him still.

\* *Editorial note* – Since 1988 marked the 50th anniversary of the handing over of Tipperary Grammar School to the Christian Brothers, a special article on the Erasmus Smith Foundation has been commissioned for the 1989 *Tipperary Historical Journal*.

