

Coolnafarna revisited

On Friday, August 5th, Coolnafarna past pupils gather in the Parish Church for a Reunion Mass. Frs. Michael Kenny and Brendan Jordan concelebrated, assisted by Very Rev. Fr. Joseph Cooney, P.P. We then went to Manor House to enjoy each other's company and swap "old school stories." A special thank you to the two Eileens – Lyons (Freeley) and Grogan (Folliard) – who contacted practically every living past pupil. We were pleased to see former teachers, Mrs. Mary Higgins, Mrs.

Nuala Forkin and Tom Higgins; also Mrs. William Mulligan and Mrs. Mary Dooley (O'Dwyer).

We were glad that Dominic Moran could be with us - he has since passed to his eternal reward, and we extend our sympathy to his relatives.

Incidentally, the most senior past pupil was Michael McNamara and the last pupil on the roll.

Thomas Cribbin (1971), also attended. As a result of our Reunion we include two memoirs in this issue.

Dr. Michael O'Dwyer, Lecturer in French, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, remembers his first year in Coolnafarna, forty years ago . . .

Coolnafarna – 1954

I first went to Coolnafarna in early July, 1954. I had spent the previous three years in the Convent School and on our last day Sr. Benignus organised games for the boys while the girls were given an introduction to second class. At three o'clock she bade us farewell but she wished me good luck in Irish as we always communicated in the first official language.

That evening at home I was duly equipped with the books which I would need in Coolnafarna. It was only then that the true significance of the word "out" used frequently by visitors to the house in previous weeks began to dawn on me. If the visitors had been talking to my father, they would say: "I suppose you'll be bringing him "out" while if they had been talking to my mother they would say: "I suppose he'll be going out with the boss." While these were pre-Thatcherite days, the word "out" still seemed to have a threefold pattern. The third "out" came on my first Friday in Coolnafarna. Fr. Rushe would visit the school at Catechism time every Friday. He would walk about the classroom while explaining the Catechism and when he came to where I was standing he paused, looked at my father and, in a typical gesture of his, held out his left hand and said: "Oh! I see you have him out." Incidentally, I can remember that the subject of his lesson was the choirs of angels. Words like "Thrones" and "Dominations" resounded all over the room. Is mó idir inné agus inniu, with the poor angels now struggling as they say in Wimbledon, "to stay in the championship."

In the course of my first year in Coolnafarna I was "chauffeured" by Mrs. Bridie Hannon, whose sons, Peter and Martin, attended the school. The Hannons were one of the many families from the town who attended Coolnafarna, such was the excellent reputation of the quality of the teaching. Mrs. Hannon was a fast dri-



ver, but I only wished on that day that she would not drive so fast. When we "got the car" my father and later my mother drove us to school. On the outskirts of Devlis the train would invariably pass us on the left and we always met the Castlerea bus between Waldron's statue and Boyle's forge. We would wave to the driver (a Mr. Cuffe), while the conductor sat at the back of the bus reading the paper. I always envied that conductor – as far as I was concerned, he had it made! On fine mornings my father would often drop us off at McHale's as he thought that we should have some experience of what it was like to walk to school. Folklore had it that one of the Robinson family used to make it to Coolnafarna on a tricycle. On such mornings I would have settled for that tricycle. We got little consolation from elderly men whom we met on the way. They reminded us that we were "spoilt" as the main roads were now tarred and children wore shoes even in Summer, so there was no suffering from stone bruises! The theory of relativity was alive and well. In retrospect, this

was an excellent experience which I, by no means, regret.

At the entrance to the school my inquisitive mind was fascinated by an iron object near the front door. It was explained to me that this was a foot-scraper which ensured that one would enter the classroom without "muddy soles" on one's shoes. I tried it out, but I think that was the first and last occasion on which I used it. The classroom had a photograph of Pádraig Pearse on one wall, while on the opposite wall was a photograph of the signatories of the Proclamation of 1916. With hindsight and with the aid of some modern jargon, I can say that I probably suffered from "culture shock." The desks did not seem to be as well polished as in the convent. There were no "shiny presses" with jars of sweets while senior pupils swept the classroom and prepared the fire. In the convent this had all been done by a lady called Rosie before we arrived at school. It also seemed strange to me that the same teacher would be teaching five or six classes in the same room. To put it in modern parlance, Coolnafarna appeared to be a more cost-effective outfit than the convent! It also struck me that my new classmates were bigger and stronger than my counterparts in the town school had been. The simple and proud explanation which I was given for this was that the country boys were brought up to work hard while the "townies" were only "sissies." Physical prowess was an important "success image in Coolnafarna in those days. It was reckoned that Tom Neenan was the strongest man in the village, because of a feat he performed in freeing himself when tied to the ground by a group of other men.

The morning's teaching was punctuated with the roll call and the visit of the postman, Jimmy Byrne, "a picturesque figure in his peaked cap and uniform" as our third class Reading Time book would have put it. After the roll call a slate was put on the wall behind the blackboard indicating the number of pupils present. The total figure declined from 65 to 47 during my five years in Coolnafarna.

After the eleven o'clock play time the word "tagaf" would resound across the yard. This meant that we were to resume duty. The word was presumably a deformation of the word tagaigf used by the

teachers (they probably said "tagaigí isteach"). So it is not only today that incorrect grammar is falling on deaf ears!

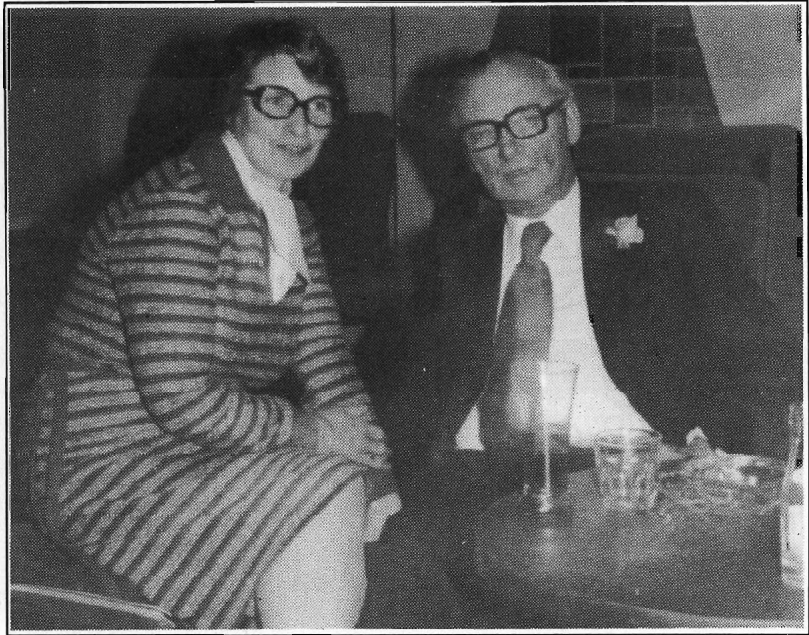
On arriving back in the classroom we could always hear the hoot of the passing train as there was a level crossing nearby. On Fridays this could be a sad occasion as a father, brother or sister of some pupil in the room might be on the train on the first stage of their journey to England. Emigration was a fact of life and most of the boys who were in Coolnafarna with me accepted that they would eventually have to emigrate.

Twelve o'clock was, of course, Catechism time but the first ritual was the arrangement of bottles of milk and cocoa (the advertisers with their "Growing up on Fry's" slogan were beginning to have an influence) around the fire so that they would be at the appropriate temperature by lunch time. Sometimes over-eager pupils might have their bottles placed in too close a proximity to the source of heat with the result that the Catechism lesson would be interrupted by explosive sounds. Of course, the teaching of Catechism reached a crescendo in November as "the day of the priest" as the Catechism examination was called, approached. Both my father and mother tried to make the point that "the day of the priest" was not a "fashion show" as it was more important to know what was forbidden by the various Commandments. They would both quote the late Canon Curley in this context. Apparently some years earlier brooches with the motif of a little dog were á la mode and featured prominently on jumpers and jackets on the big day! On visits to schools in the parish before the examination, the Canon is reputed to have told pupils that the evening prior to the event should be spent with Catechism in hand and that time should not be wasted looking for "the dogeen." One could imagine a later-day journalist running with the headline, "Canon prefers Dogma to Dogeen."

Speaking of religion, I should say that Church of Ireland and Presbyterian families also resided in the area. (I remember the Pughs and the Mayers). Their children also attended the school. They had left the school in 1954 and I understand that they went home for an early lunch break during Catechism time.

As the travelling people camped regularly on their visits to the area at the entrance to the Leo Road they sometimes sent their children to the school for the duration of their stay. I remember two occasions when this happened. I also remember their statements to the effect that they would not like to settle down but that they would "sooner be moving around."

The football match at lunch time was a serious affair. As my father had been a prominent Mayo footballer, he regarded the match as a coaching session and would sometimes join in and play with the "los-



Marie O'Connell and Dr. Eamon Waldron (R.I.P.).

ing" team to try to restore the balance. This game usually took place in Dalton's and sometimes Neenan's field. The final whistle was, of course, "tagaí."

The afternoon was usually devoted to reading and History and Geography. There was also Preston's History of Ireland, which would not meet with the approval of the modern revisionists but which, nevertheless, presented the events of history in a dramatic and exciting way. The "Reading Time" books covered a wide variety of topics while we covered the Geography of all the countries of Europe, using John D. Sheridan's text book with its smooth shining pages and excellent black and white photographs. We were, of course, preparing for the "Primary Cert." at an early stage, where we would be tested on parsing and analysis, composition writing and what we would nowadays call comprehension tests and précis passages.

However, the reading lesson was not confined to the prescribed text. A pupil might sometimes be asked to read aloud a report of a match from the "Western People." We were taught to be critical of "over-flowery" language such as "he lofted the leather over the horizontal to register his side's first minor towards the close of the first moiety." We were also encouraged to look critically at the way in which society was presented in the paper, e.g., the excessive emphasis on court cases. We were engaging in media studies long before the discipline had been established.

Heating for the school was provided by families of pupils who either brought a "load of turf" to the school or sent a sum of money (ten shillings). As the gate of the school was too narrow for a cart to enter, this meant that the pupils had to be employed to bring the turf around to a shed at the back of the school. 1.45 p.m.

was, therefore, a popular time for the arrival of a load of turf. The senior boys would allocate the quota which the younger boys could be deemed able to carry without causing them undue strain. It was not considered appropriate to move with excessive speed when carrying the turf. This ensured that the operation would last until 3 p.m. One also became a connoisseur on the variety of qualities of turf which could be obtained in the area!

The remains of a flower bed dominated the entrance to the school. This was a relic of early days when nature study formed part of the curriculum as were the beakers, graduated cylinders and other scientific equipment which could be found in the presses and which were taken out from time to time to give us an introduction to Science.

The Stations were, of course, a big event. In the afternoon a member of the family which had the Stations would call to the school for the teacher's children and bring us to their house for a party. This was one of the many tokens of gratitude expressed by the people of Coolnafarna for the high quality of teaching which they felt their children had received. There were also regular Christmas cards from past pupils. The first card to arrive always came from Fr. Jackie Jennings, whose mother also taught in the school, and whose brother, Jarlath, I meet each year in Ballina on a visit to partake in an Open Day for secondary schools.

The hoot of the three o'clock train seemed to have a more pleasant sound than that of eleven o'clock. It was the signal for a winding down operation as "home lessons" would be given and great care had to be taken to see that the fire was put out and the dying coals put into the ashes before we wended our way towards "dulce domum."