

PAST TIMES RECALLED

By Tom Buckley

Introduction (by Book Committee)

As will be gleaned from what follows, Tom Buckley (1917-2004) was a natural story-teller. He was a sharp observer of life and human behaviour and had an eye for detail. He wrote a number of articles, mostly about his recollections from times well past. Two of his pieces, reproduced below, recall characters and ways of living from his childhood.

Tom was born and reared in Caherguillamore. The family home was the two-storey farmhouse that is presently the home of the Murnane family, across the road from the vacant building that was once the home of “Mikey” Hogan. Tom had three sisters.

Tom’s daughter, Annette Buckley, provided us with the following note on her father’s life.

“My father, Thomas Buckley, was born in the Coombe Hospital, Dublin, on 31st January 1917. His mother, Anne, had lost earlier babies in childbirth; so it was decided that when her time came, she would be sent to the Coombe Hospital.

Her husband, James, took her by pony and trap to Knocklong Railway Station. She travelled on her own to Kingsbridge Station where she got a pony and trap to the hospital. Three days later, along with her newborn baby boy, Thomas, she made the return journey to Knocklong. I understand that it snowed for most of the time.

Anne went on to have three more babies – Maura, Jo and Nancy. All the children attended the local primary school in Grange.

Maura and Jo moved to Crettyard in Laois where they opened a shop. Later they moved to Dundrum in South Dublin where they had a very fine, upmarket grocery shop. In the 1950s, they moved to “The Little House” in Kilmacanogue (Co Wicklow) where they had a ‘B&B’ and a thriving tea rooms business.

Nancy studied medicine in UCD and on graduation went to work in England where she continued her studies and graduated as a psychiatrist. She worked for much of her life in Guy's Hospital. James Buckley died in 1942.

Tom married Teresa Collopy from Clooncunna (Co Limerick) in 1947. Shortly before the marriage, Tom had purchased a public house, "The Cosy Kitchen" and grocery business in Elton near Knocklong. They had four children in Elton before they decided to move to Dublin. In 1959, they sold the business in Elton and moved to Clonskeagh, Dublin. They bought a grocery business which they ran until retirement. One more child was born in Clonskeagh.

Upon moving to Dublin, Tom became an active member of what was then called "The Limerickmen's Association" and was closely involved with it for the rest of his life. Teresa died in 1993, and Tom died in 2004."

A Life of Great Loneliness and Fear (by Tom)

He was gnarled and bent like the bushes on the roadside. He was poorly clad. He never had a Sunday suit. His education was sparse. His university, the bitter, bitter existence that was his fate. He never had any money, not even a penny. He didn't seem to need it. Yet he was cheerful, and when I look back on my childhood days, he was one of my unforgettable characters.

He seemed ageless, not young, but again not very old. He had a tramp-like existence except that we looked on him as one of our own, a neighbour. He seldom left his 'beat', stretching about two miles from Glenogra Bridge near Fedamore to the Cross of Grange, except when he went to Mass or made a call to one or two of 'his' houses outside his Pale.

We little ones were always mystified about his origin. Some thought he was always there. We could never think that he was once a babe. He seemed so permanent. As we grew older, we learned that he was an orphan. He was born out of wedlock, reared in Croom Poor House (shades of Dickens). It was said that a portion of that old building collapsed on him in a storm and as a result he was badly injured. Crippled for life... no future... no home... just a crooked little man who walked with the aid of two very crooked sticks.

To the children on his 'beat', he was a mine of information. He saw the fairies. He chilled us with his tale of the "banshee", the night auld Patsy died. "There were two banshees there and to hear their ologoning!" He heard the "Coiste Bodhar" – the dreaded headless coach [*driver and horses*] – on the night the Lady in the Great House died. The turn of the road where the "Black Dog" was seen. The story of the "White Knight" – the long dead Lord of Desmond on his ghostly white steed shod in silver shoes, seen once every seven years.

He terrified us, yet we always longed for more of his tales: his skirmishes with the Black-and-Tans and his non-observance of curfew – he had nowhere to go. The night the ‘Tan’ officer went to shoot him but for the intercession of the local policeman. That terrible night the dreaded “auxiliaries” surrounded Caherguillamore House where the boys on the run, with their friends, were having some Christmas celebrations. He retold the story vividly, so many times that one would think he was there. The dead six [*five Volunteers and one British*] that were thrown into a lorry. The wounded, the battered and bleeding victims. The carting off to Dartmoor or Spike Island of the survivors. He told of the ‘Verey lights’ that turned night into day. The rattle of machine guns. The burning of the republican homes. The destruction of Grange Barrack. The ambush of Crokers [*Grange Ambush*].

Of course, we knew of all those happenings. But we always liked to have the added chill of his stories. Of course, being always on the roadside, he was a sentinel of life in our locality. He knew, without enquiring, everybody’s business. “Hayes’s servant girl is courting Ryans’ servant boy. That won’t last long when her ‘auld fella’ gets to know about it.”

He knew where a pheasant was to be got, where the rabbits were plentiful, and when the birdcatcher came from Limerick, he was always consulted. “Try Dempsey’s hay reeks, there are plenty black caps in the hay, ’tis full of linnets – great singers every one of them.” He always heard the first cuckoo and the first corncrake. He was sure to see the first wild geese in the autumn. “It will be a hard winter he would say, I never see such a crop of haws. God is providing for the little birds.” “I heard the curlew last night; there will be no hay saved tomorrow.” And somehow he seemed always right. He knew the people who cured warts, ringworm, the mumps and measles. Doctors were never consulted for such like ailments.

He first came to our locality in service to a farmer and worked as best he could despite his great handicaps. But his infirmity and rheumatics were too great a handicap, and he was forced to live on the charity of his neighbours. His ‘hotel’ was the corn stacks and hay barns of the locality. Indeed, he was known to be a source of great worry to farmers as he used to climb (somehow) onto the hay stacks and, as he said himself, bed down snug and warm for the night with “Mrs Hayseed” at “Keenan’s Hotel”, a well-known make of hay shed [*Keenan*].

Many is the fright he gave men in dark winter mornings out foddering cattle, when one would pitch a deadly hayfork on to a bench of hay, to find the poor old devil escaping impalement by a few inches.

He never asked for permission to stay in anybody’s hay shed; he would be refused. People were always afraid that he would be found dead from the cold or injured from forks or deadly hay knives or again falling off high benches of hay. But somehow he survived the forks and the cruel cold of the long friendless winters and would be seen at daybreak on the roadside waiting for the first sign of life – chimney

smoke. An indication that breakfast was at hand. The kettle was on, “Ere a drop left in the pot missus” would be his plea.

And so another day began. He had a most ferocious thirst for tea. Great big mugs were useless. He would demolish a boiler (large sweet can that contained about five or six pints) of tea with great helpings of some home-made bread in a very short time. He disdained baker’s bread. Not another thing did he look for. He had no relish for potatoes, cabbage and meat. He also disdained cups of tea – “no taste from the ‘tay’ in them things”.

He was openly critical of a kindly returned Yank, who insisted on giving him his tea in a dainty tray with a beautiful teapot and an elegant teacup with home-made pastries and bought bread. “That bloody auld Yank with her thimble-fulls of ‘tay’ and little cakes as big as buttercups.” Poor old soul, he just wasn’t used to dainties.

While we loved to meet him, we never wanted to go too near him as he was known to play host to a large population of very tiny creatures. It was the days before “DDT” was invented, and it was held that Keatings would have little success. As one wag put it – “The fleas were so numerous that they had railways cut through him”. But he suffered his discomfort with good humour and with resignation. He fell afoul of the law a few times. Out of pity perhaps, or fear for his person, the Guards [*Gardai*] had him charged with vagrancy, and he was marched off to the county jail. But, boy oh boy, we children were glad to see him back again. He regaled us with a whole lot of new tales. It was our first time meeting somebody who was in prison. He met the man who tricked the bishop – the man who made poteen – the German from the Shannon Scheme [*electrification*]. He spoke of the “Foxy Robber” and hosts of others.

The authorities made many attempts to have him committed to the workhouse, where he would be properly cared for. But no, he would have none of it. Often, he said that he would rather die on the roadside than go to Newcastle.... Shades of his childhood experience.

It was during the economic war of the thirties that he fell ill; he was in a stable of a neighbouring farmer. The doctor was sent for, who ordered an ambulance immediately. He was dying with jaundice. Yet, with superhuman strength he managed to barricade himself in; so much so, that he defied both ambulance men and Gardai to get to him. Next morning, there was no response and the door was hacked down. There he lay stiff and cold – his soul in the arms of Abraham. He had defied the establishment, and he died where he wished to die – where he first worked.

Our road was the poorer for his passing. One may well ask, what was the purpose of his life? A life of unbelievable hardship and deepest privation. A life of great loneliness and fear. A life of perishing winters and rejection. Perhaps he helped people to be better Christians – “As long as you did it unto the least of one of my brethren”.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge at Glenogra since he died. I can still see in my mind’s eye, a smile on his poor dead face. His name was Paddy Moore.

The Fair of Bruff (by Tom)

The 'Fair Day' has disappeared from the rural scene. Like the branch creamery, the dispensary and the cross road dance, it has vanished into folk history. All victims of progress. The disinfected cattle mart has replaced one of the great institutions – the fair day – and country life is the poorer. Something which was an intrinsic part of rural life has succumbed to an inescapable element of progress.

You were all of nine years when you convinced yourself that you were big enough to help your father and Johnny drive cattle to the fair of Bruff in the morning. You told her [*mother*] that there were lads half your age going. Somehow your enthusiasm prevailed. What excitement and what ecstasy on getting permission. Johnny prepared a shortened ash plant for you. No self-respecting male would face the 18th October fair without a good ash plant – the staff of the cattleman.

Sleep was unthinkable. The night wore on – nine, ten, eleven. It was the first time that you heard the clock on the mantelpiece strike twelve. The vigil was too much; you dropped off exhausted. You were roused by your mother; you were dropping off again when you heard voices in the kitchen. Then you realised that the great moment had arrived. You trundled into your clothes, bolted down a big breakfast, and you were ready. With your mother's help, Johnny and your father had the cattle corralled in a convenient paddock, awaiting your arrival. Herself checked to see that you had your gloves as well as your ash plant.

The drive started, you were sent in front to head off the strays from wandering into side roads and boreens. In your excitement, you ran well ahead of the flock, and you waited and waited at the old breen, but one old cow had broken back from the rest causing the inevitable delay.

Then, in the awful stillness of the dark morning, you remember that the place where you stood was the very spot where the dreaded "Black Dog" appeared. You were torn between running back home or standing at your post. Sweat ran down your back as you peered furtively into dark corners looking for signs of the four-legged ghost. Just in time you hear the cattle coming your way. So, after many episodes with that assorted herd consisting of weanlings, two-year-olds and a couple of wily old cows, you reach the Cross of Grange, the first mile done.

You are now on the tarred road, and fences are better. The young cattle are adventurous and mad for the road, just like yourself. But the old cows seem filled with foreboding and seek every opportunity to break away to homelands.

Soon you can hear the shouting of men and the lowing of cattle as other herds are on the move. You realise, as you get near to Bruff, the road is becoming a seething mass of excitement. An assortment of horse-drawn vehicles pass. Sidecars, traps and common carts, all usually driven by senior farmers who had left their stock in the care of younger help. Occasionally, to the consternation of man and

beast, motor cars passed by bringing buyers from far away. Cattle who never before encountered car headlights are dazed, frightened and bewildered. You too are dazzled by the headlights as they are new to you also.

Droves of cattle begin to get closer, and you can see great clouds of vapour rising from the excited cattle. You keep close to Johnny and hold his hand. The fear of God is on you. You see so many cattle on that four-mile drive that you think the cattle population of Ireland has assembled there. Cursing, shouting and organised chaos prevails – sights and sounds you thought never existed.

The cattle are herded into a vantage spot in front of Collins's pub. But you had to be watchful. The old cows were only waiting for the chance to break away home. Day began to break as latecomers arrived – increasing the pushing and shoving. Steam poured from the extended nostrils of excited animals. Steam poured too from the extended nostrils of fat cattle buyers as they emerged from Collins's pub. It was a weird and wonderful sight as the outline of the church spire appeared through the artificial fog in the grey light of dawn. You see more neighbours. You saw some bigger school pals who looked superior, being veterans of many a fair.

You envied the little fella with the two-penny packets of Jacobs. You envied the little son of the Cork cattle dealer with his lovely cane walking stick and his boots with the yellow uppers, just like his dad's. Like father, like son.

You hold tight to Johnny as you were warned to do. You saw fierce-looking, bloody-faced buyers bear down on hungry farmers, offering ridiculously low prices for the stock and going away in high dudgeon when their offers were refused. "Look here my good fella, I'll give you £9 for them famished mongrels of yours – and no more." A neighbour tries to help and calls the buyer back. "Why should I come back", roars the red-faced one, "Sure the man must be out of his mind asking £13 for them famished specimens". The buyer is reluctant to come nearer; he also seems reluctant to go too far away. The language of the buyer gets rougher and louder. He looks about him for someone to pull him back. Soon a few neighbours of the seller arrive.

Quite a crowd has now collected, and the tradition of bargaining goes on – pushing, shouting, cursing and more cursing until your ears went red. You thought that a big row was starting. But you learn it is only a ritual of coming to a deal. The time honoured ceremony is carried on – spitting on palms, splitting the difference, aspersions on the sanity of the seller for expecting such an outrageous price. But the odds are stacked against the seller. He is only a novice compared to the buyer and his pals who are at a fair every other morning.

Times are bad, and the business at the fair is worse. So, the seller has to settle for £9.10 shillings. The cattle are marked with a raddle to signify a sale. The unfortunate seller is then hauled to a pub where he has to stand a round of drinks to the buyer and his pals, plus any of his own neighbours who helped in the deal.

The cattle you drive to the fair are eventually sold. You shed a tear for the old cows, they were longer in the place than yourself, and suddenly you realised their fate is to wind up in a cannery – hardly a just reward for many years of faithful service.

Johnny treats you to a large bottle of “O’Sullivan’s” and a packet of Jacobs, as a reward for the many hours since you started out. You saw the stalls where they sold harness and tackling. You were taken to the auction where they sold wooden ladders and paling posts. The greatest thrill of all was to see a circus ‘strong man’ display his powers, by hoisting a heavy wheel of a common cart onto his chin and balancing it without hands as he walked around the small circle made by onlookers. He also had a mighty whip which he could ‘crack’ like a pistol shot.

You felt he was the greatest you ever saw. But obviously the profession did not pay very well as he was dressed very shabbily. His wife, too, who went around with him looked as if she could do with a good meal. You saw the Scottish ballad singer with the foxy woman. Despite his great voice, he too was working for pence. You marvelled at the blind fiddler, who had a big crowd around him.

You follow Johnny to Creed’s bar where some friends are waiting for him. You are treated to oceans of O’Sullivan’s lemonade until it comes out your nose. You fall asleep – sick, sore and tired. You wake to the blessed sight of your mother who has come in the horse and trap to collect us.

Himself said it was the worst fair he was ever at. He had to give the cattle away. It was better to sell them than to bring the stock home again, as fodder for the winter was very scarce. Bills had to be paid; the rate collector would be calling, and the annuities were due.

Despite all the gloom, despite the night without sleep, despite the blistered feet and despite the dreadful buyers with the ruddy faces, it was the most wonderful day of your young life. No, you wouldn’t exchange a seat in the cattle mart of today for the great adventure of the “Fair of Bruff”.

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References and Notes:

(1) “A life of Great Loneliness and Fear” was previously published in *The Fedamore News*

(2) “The Fair of Bruff” was previously published in *The Dawn*

(3) *The Thursday Livestock Market in High Street, Killarney, from the Stereo card collection of Maggie Land Blanck –*

www.maggielblanck.com

