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Icelandic Interlude

by Collete Martin

On the 8th of August 1985 I first set foot in Iceland. It was not as I had expected. All along when I was in school whenever I thought of Iceland, which wasn't often in my mind's eye I saw a country covered in snow from one end of the year to the next, with days of total darkness during the winter months and the midnight sun during the summer, not forgetting the polar bears and penguins roaming around the place and also the eskimos living in igloos away from the cities. But no, it was not like that, my first memories are rather vague really due to the excitement and one thing and another, but I do remember it was bright, there was no snow that I could see except on the very top to the mountains, no polar bears, no eskimos or igloos. It was a damp overcast Summers day. The international airport where we landed is situated about an hours drive cont. Page 2

Christmas Memories

by P.J. Duffy Killaville

In days gone by the pattern of festivities that took place during the Christmas season varied a good deal from the kind of celebrations we see taking place to day. "Generations change", so they say, and so also do old customs. People like myself, who have been around for some time are inclined to think that the spirit of Christmas time was much more fervent and real when we were young. Nowadays we tend to occupy our minds with nostalgic thoughts of long ago, and the tedious preparation that then took place in the weeks leading up to Christmas,

and the constant looking forward to those days of enjoyment that lay ahead.

How I vividly remember the big market day, when long before daylight in the morning, donkeys and carts laden with turkeys would be heard travelling in the direction of the local town for the Christmas sales. Come evening time, those same donkeys and carts would wind their way homewards weighted with goods and a sizeable portion of the Christmas fare.

Oh, how I remember myself and other members of our family standing as children in our kitchen doorway watching Page 3



Wishing you a real Old-fashioned CHRISTMAS

cont. from page 1. from the capital city of Reykjavik. So the drive gave me a chance to have my first real view of the country. There were no houses along that main road. It was built through a lava field. You see, Iceland has many volcanoes, most are now dead but some are still active, so a large percentage of the country is covered in lava which is probably thousands of years old. It was like being on the moon - just dull grey black rocks as far as you could see on any side and very very little vegetation except the odd bit of grass or odd flower that was able to survive the harsh conditions.

Many people may wonder what exactly brought me to Iceland. Well, I am a member of the Legion of Mary lay organization and I went as a volunteer missionary, and we literally went two by two knocking from door to door. There is a group of such people there, mainly Irish but also some English, American or Austrian depending on the time you actually arrive, working under two Irish priests for the Legion of Mary. Our job was to go out and convert Iceland.

The history of religion in Iceland is quite interesting as it has had many associations with Ireland and the Irish people throughout its history. In the year 550 it is said that St. Brendan went to Iceland. He was followed in 700 by some Irish monks who brought the catholic religion with them. The country then became a catholic country as the Icelanders were converted by the Irish monks and Irish became the native language for a time. In the year 850 the Norwegians and Vikings came and settled there. Some of these came from Ireland around the pale

bringing their Irish partners with them and they also brought their own language, culture and religions. However, the catholic religion was more popular in the country so Iceland was made officially a catholic country in the year 1,000. It remained thus until 1550 around the time of the Reformation.

At that time the country was under Danish rule so the king of Denmark ordered the country to become lutheran and the catholic Bishop was murdered. Iceland had no army so they could not fight. Thus the catholic and all other religions except the lutheran was banned officially until about 100 years ago. Now the country has total religious freedom and they certainly take advantage of it as there are all makes and varieties of sects and religions. The country has a population of approx 250,000 and of this there are about 1,600 registered catholics, but only about half of these practice and most of these are foreigners - Irish, Polish, Italian. There are ten priests and a few different religious orders. The order of which I have the best memories is a group of Polish carmelite nuns and they sing like angels. Everyone goes to see them and asks them for prayers, lutherans and catholics alike. Not many people in Iceland practise their religion whatever it may be, they maybe go to church once a year at Christmas, Easter, or if they have a christening, funeral, wedding, or confirmation. They have a very materialistic society and have not much time for God.

The Icelandic people however, are a very kind, warmhearted, welcoming people once they get used to you.

A little shy at first but in my nine months there I never had a door closed in my face and was never spoken to rudely or abused in anyway on my visitation. While we were out visiting, people we had never met before would have no hesitation about inviting us in. I recall one day where a lady we were visiting even went so far as to bring us out a tray of coffee and biscuits to the door because she had visitors inside and it was such a cold day. Coffee is what they mostly drink, as thick and black as treacle. Ask for a cup of tea and you are considered somewhat grand or eccentric. They make the coffee in percolators that are going from one end of the day to the other. Most haven't even got a kettle to boil a drop of water. I personally prefer tea so when I was having a break one day in a house where I was working, I asked the lady for tea; of course she had no kettle so she took a glass of cold water, put it in the microwave and heated it that way, and so I had a glass of tea.

Naturally, we had to work to keep ourselves so we got jobs cleaning peoples' houses. Now these are upper class people so their houses were indeed very grand. I worked for a secretary to an ambassador as well as a government minister among others. The houses are quite large and made and decorated with only the best of products. Beautiful crystal and ornaments, persian rugs strewn around the parquet flooring, all sorts of antiques here there and everywhere. I was always afraid I would drop and break something of immense value so the dusting was always a terrifying nightmare. One house I worked in was a real show

cont. from Page 1

this train of traffic pass by. Some would halt to distribute sweets, such being the generosity of the day.

Years later I was to hit the same trail myself and journey to Ballymote town with my cart load of turkeys, while my late mother, God rest her soul, followed behind on her bicycle. The place was usually crowded out as we inched our way to the top of the rock. Exporters of poultry would move swiftly from cart to cart selecting out birds, and issuing dockets at the conclusion of a deal. Names of well known dealers in the trade at the time were the Motley brothers of Drumrod, and the O'Beirnes of Longford. After selling your turkeys, you then made a beeline for the market house, where the late Jim Healy placed your birds on a scale and supplied you with the necessary weight certificate. You then collected payment from the purchaser, and moved to the nearest backyard where you unhitched your donkey from the cart and placed it inside a stable. You were then free to spend a couple of hours moving about the town, listening to street traders and other odd characters who usually descended on the place for the big market day.

There were a few trick -o'-the-look men who were always there on occasions like this. You had the fellow with the three card trick who had a tiny three edged table which he carried around with him. He would plank it down in the centre of a crowd, and challenge anyone for the wager of a pound to find the lady card.

After shuffling the three cards, he would pause for a moment to show you the lady card, usually the Queen of Hearts and then

after a quick movement, he would place them face downwards on the table. To me he seemed a proper conjurer, because not many people succeeded in finding the lady card.

You then had the real trick-o-the-loop man, an individual with another small table, and a greasy looking strip of felt about two feet long which he folded double giving you a look at the looped end, before rolling it double into a circle, and kinking short stretches of the strip as he rolled. He then held the two ends of the completed circle in his hand, and for a wager asked you to find the loop and hold the strip with a short prong.

Like the fellow with the three card trick, his act seemed to be a highly deceptive piece of juggling, for although you thought you had followed the original loop carefully, you only won when he saw fit to allow you, and that was seldom and mostly to lure other people who might be standing by.

Another character set up a chart of numbers on a frame, alongside of which a monkey on a chain leash clambored up and down a short ladder. The monkey's presence was of course a sort of decoy used for the purpose of keeping the crowd around. The gentleman at the chart went on to inform his audience of the massive prizes that were on offer, whilst his mate moved in and out amongst the crowd selling tickets at sixpence per pick. The whole exercise seemed to be a cleverly devised kind of lottery, which if properly operated could bring in a handsome profit.

With youthful curiosity I edged my way as far as the chart and the scruffy looking little monkey. The little animal was at this

time seated on the underneath ring of its ladder gazing suspiciously at the crowd that surrounded it. The late Tom (Jinker) Coleman who was standing nearby landed a tobacco spit in the eye of the unsuspecting monkey. For a moment the distraught animal clutched at its aching eye, then in a state of frenzy, it mounted the top rung of the ladder and sprayed a sizeable portion of the crowd, including Jinker, with urine.

At the church wall corner you had travelling tinsmith the late Pat McDonagh (Big Pat) and his benevolent wife displaying their glittering household utensils. She acted as saleswoman, while Pat stood by with his tool kit or budget, ready for any repair jobs that might come his way. Pat, who was king of his clam, was a jovial character who sported a broad rimmed hat, and was known locally to almost everybody in town and country.

Street singers, the late Ned Devaney moved in and out amongst the throngs, a brand new melodion strapped across his shoulder. At the conclusion of each performance would produce a coin canister, to receive a sprinkle of coppers. He had a habit of uttering this phrase when introducing himself to prospective contributors, "ah shure ten bob will do ya Sir".

On another occasion, as I stood amongst the milieu of a big market a guineahen broke free from its fetters, and flew upwards into the air eventually coming to rest on the ornamental plinth at the base of the church steeple, on the opposite side of the street. All efforts to entice it down failed, and the incredible bird spent

the rest of the day up there, where it emitted a rashing sound that echoed from one end of the town to the other.

Looking back now I can recall many more incidents that made this and other occasions so memorable.

Christmas in the country would not be the same without the dropeen of poteen brewed from the local still. Not that there was ever much of the stuff made in our area, mainly because, parents didn't want to introduce this illicit recipe to their children. Nevertheless, there were always those who were prepared to take on the venture, and risk their necks to produce what used to be known as the "Christmas Rum".

At the tail end of our farm was a place known as the Clochaun. On an old passageway leading to a footbridge, was a piece of waste ground known as normans-land. In bygone days, it was the ideal haunt of the poteen maker.

As a boy I can remember my late father saying to my mother, after returning from feeding the cattle one morning, "The boys were on the job last night", "Ah" said she "they are working on the Christmas Rum, shure it's late November now".

They could know from the tell-tale wisps of smoke that curled up from inside a clump of blackthorn bushes that the poteen-makers were at work.

Days later we would examine the spot, to discover numerous empty bottles that smelled strongly of the brew.

Old people used to maintain that in order to produce a successful "rum", you were advised to set aside the first noggin to pass through the still for the fairies.

Long ago, preparation for Christmas involved white washing the old thatched homestead inside

and out with slack lime burned at the local kiln. The front door got a fresh coat of red paint, as did the dresser, the chairs, and the rack which held the tins. The latter utensils were then shone until they sparkled like diamonds. You then decorated the lot with holly and ivy.

The woman of the house baked the Christmas cakes in a large metal oven, on top of the kitchen fire. She also was the one who measured out the ingredients, while other members of the family helped with the blending and mixing. After placing the cake in the oven, a metal lid was put overhead and covered with a heap of glowing red hot coals. There was little if any icing used in those days, and currants and raisins were seldom seen except at Christmas time.

Christmas recreation in those days centered mainly around the country house dance, although before the festive season passed, you were likely to spend a night or two at the local dancehall where you danced your fill to popular dance bands of the day, like Stephen Garve, Pat O'Hara or Jack Ruane, for the princely sum of five shillings.

Another form of popular Christmas entertainment was the porter spree, where a group of men would chip in about ten shillings a piece, to buy a quarter barrel of stout, some loaves and ham, and a couple of bottles of wine for the ladies. You could take your wife or girlfriend along, if you so desired, and eat, drink, dance and be merry until the small hours of the morning.

And of course, Christmas was not complete without a visit from the wren boys on St. Stephen's day. I remember a group of us

boys trudging from house to house, across the countryside on the wren boys day. It was a day we had long looked forward to and had gleefully prepared by making old fake faces from cardboard, and marking on the eyebrows and moustaches with Nugget polish. The average taking at each door amounted to something like three old pence. Some of the more generous ones gave sixpence, but a few just gave one penny. I remember one young recruit in the gang bitterly complaining after being haded a penny by a certain woman "She broke her bloody heart, herself and her ould hen" (The old penny had the form of a hen embossed on one side). Mind you, we enjoyed every minute of this crack, and many happy memories of the incidents that took place still linger on in my mind, like the evening we arrived at the house of an old woman who kept a cross dog.

We were armed with sticks, so we were able to keep the vicious animal at bay. The dog retreated to the kitchen, and then took refuge under the pounce bed near the fireplace. One of the boys prodded the animal with his stick, with the result that it went almost berserk under the bed. "Lie down ya whore ye" yelled the old lady. Unlike the present time, it was an expression you were not likely to hear very often from the lips of a woman in those days.

On another occasion we arrived at the door of a poor old widow woman who had three cows which she kept tethered to a gable wall inside her kitchen. I had already heard of this woman and her cows, but now had come to witness the spectacle at first hand, and see the animals resting and re-chewing in the warmth of the kitchen, while she and her son were

having a cup of tea by the fire.

She said she didn't have much money so instead she gave us a thruppeny woodbine which amounted to four cigarettes. Since there were six of us in the gang, there wasn't enough fags to go round, so we resorted to breaking some in two. We were far more grateful than if we had received money, and the flavour of the little woodbines on that particular day tasted sweeter than anything we had ever known.

The grand finale to the Christmas festivities usually took place on the twelfth night, with a dance or Ceili in the local hall or schoolhouse, in which you had some added attractions like spot prizes and a fancy dress parade.

Moments like these were a rare speciality, indeed. Contrasted with todays numerous pleasures they might pale to insignificance, yet they have left in the minds of people like myself many happy memories of Christmasses gone by, and of those kind generous people, no longer with us, who made it all possible.

Protecting our Past

How metal detectors are damaging our heritage.

By Martin A. Timoney

The heritage of our country is to be seen in its Saint's Graves, Diarmuid and Grainne's Beds (Megalithic Tombs), burial mounds, fairy forts (ring-forts), castles, abbeys, holy wells, etc. More of it is below ground. This includes cist graves, hoards of objects of all periods, the everyday and not-so-everyday objects that go with these sites to make up the fuller picture of our past.

There are people archaeologists, trained to record, examine, excavate and preserve these sites and objects.

When archaeologists wish to dig (excavate) a site they apply for a licence to the Office of Public Works, the only body who can grant permission to legally excavate a site. The O.P.W. then considers not only the site but more importantly the archaeologists. One would need experience as a worker on several

excavations for a successful application because every excavation will produce an endless series of problems that only experience can deal with.

Objects found on a site are important in themselves, but their position in the ground and their relationships to each other and to the site are often of much greater significance. Take for example the metal fittings of an Iron Age chariot, the wooden parts of which have long disintegrated leaving only stains in the soil: such evidence would only be recognised by an experienced archaeologist carefully excavating all layers of soil down to the one in question.

Archaeological procedure have progressed a great deal in the last decades. But now a new menace has appeared on the scene to tear our heritage in the ground to pieces: the metal detector. People who use this device are plundering our heritage for their individual gain, be that self gratification or financial reward. They are continuing the destruction and pillage of our heritage just as the Vikings did and as Cromwell did.

When the user of the metal detector digs down to find the piece of metal detected by his equipment, he has no regard for the layers of archaeological information that he is cutting through and destroying, layers vital for the reconstruction of our past.

Dr. A. T. Lucas, late Director of the National Museum, often made the comment that the heritage of Europe is hanging on the walls of their art galleries, while the heritage of Ireland is buried in the ground. cont. page 12

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ICELANDIC INTERLUDE

piece, it had marble floors and carpets inches thick, lots of glass and mirrors and silver and chrome. The bathroom was something else, one wall completely covered in mirrors, the other wall - marble, the floor marble and the bath very large, round, and sunken. Indeed it was beautiful but my first thought then was, how am I ever going to clean that bath? In the heel of the reel I had to take off socks and slippers and get into it and clean it that way. I say socks and slippers because nobody in Iceland wears shoes in their houses. You take your shoes off at the door no matter who you are or what you are so my slippers always came to work with me. I suppose they take off their shoes because their homes are so nice and clean and who wants heel marks all over their parquet floors. I think its a very good idea. It took a while to get used to it though, I would go into a house at the beginning and the person would stand there looking down at my shoes and suddenly I would remember - shoes off.

The ladies of the house were very fussy about their cleaning. There was a different cloth and bottle for each thing to be cleaned and for the floors the water couldn't be too hot or cold or too dirty or the bucket too full or empty. But once they were gone out to work or wherever, I used whatever was handiest and they were none the wiser. However, they were very decent and we were well paid for our work. We needed to be well paid too because their standard of living is very much higher than ours. The essential commodities are very expensive and a weeks

shopping could work out at anything up to £200 or more and that does not include milk and bread every day. The food is basically the same as here, bread, milk, butter, cheese and so on, with all the most popular breakfast cereals and fizzy drinks. A lot of fish of course is consumed as Iceland's main industry, is fishing. For any fish lover the varieties available are tremendous. The Icelanders would have a main meal of fish for their Sunday dinner like we would have a roast. You could have raw fish, dried fish, smoked fish, frozen fillets and so on. You could also have whale or seal meat depending on which you fancy. I personally had neither though I cooked whale meat on one occasion. It's terrible looking meat and would remind you a little of liver and very oily, you could just fry it but what most of them do to get the real flavour and get rid of the oil is to soak it overnight or longer in milk and then cook it however they fancy. They also eat horse meat and quite a lot of it. Needless to say it was never bought in our house though I have a sneaking suspicion I was given it one day when I was working in a certain place in the guise of meatballs, but I don't like to think about that. Their lambs meat and mutton is top quality and very very tasty. They can rear sheep on the mountainy land so that makes up a good part of their farming. Chicken and poultry is very expensive and of very poor quality. They cannot grow grain or fodder to feed a large quantity of hens or other animals so it has to be imported or else they have to be imported. Beef and pork are also quite expensive. They also have all sorts of jams and

spreads for bread or crackers etc. A typically Icelandic food is called Skyr; it is like yogurt and you can have it natural or flavoured. They eat it on their cereals along with sour milk or for dessert and its also used in cooking and the children all love it was would eat bowls of it. They have many traditions with food e.g. on Pancake Tuesday instead of pancakes they eat loads of buns made with choux pastry and filled with cream and chocolate. Around that time they also eat tons of split peas. I'm not sure of the reason but they don't have turkeys at Christmas or rich puddings and fruit cakes. Like every country they have their own various customs and traditions.

As I mentioned earlier fishing is their main industry and there are many fish factories along the coast. Working in these must be a terrible experience, the conditions are very poor but the pay is excellent. Imagine being up to your ankles in fishy water and having the smell of fish in your nostrils all the time. However, they don't seem to mind and many many people come from New Zealand to work in these factories.

Another industry which is important for many reasons is the wool industry. Iceland produces the famous Alafoss and Lopli wools which are used mainly for Icelandic sweaters in this country and many others. They also produce beautiful woollen garments - cardigans, jumpers, jackets, coats, suits, blankets and many more for which they are renowned. They have many souvenier shops containing these woollens along with lots of other products - ornaments made and decorated with lava,

pictures, books, teeshirts and candles. These shops are a great haunt for the tourists and indeed I spent some time in them myself. There is a candle store in the centre of Reykjavik where they make the most beautiful candles, handmade and carved in all shapes, sizes and colours. The Icelanders are very fond of candles and when you go to visit a house for a meal or whatever they will normally light a candle in your honour - it is the custom. Often they give candles as gifts and these particular candles are a beautiful memory of the country to have.

Iceland is not as yet on the usual trail for tourists. It is unspoiled really and has an awful lot to offer with many beautiful waterfalls and land formations. Where else could you climb to the top of a volcano which last erupted in 1973 and is still hot? Where else can you see thermal activity at its best, boiling mud, geysers, natural hot lakes and on the other hand mountains covered with snow in the middle of summer and miles of glaciers. It is a truly beautiful country and well worth a visit. There are few trees as the winter conditions are too harsh for them to grow to any height so it is a very barren country.

Iceland is known as the land of ice and fire. Glaciers cover nearly 12% of the total area of the country so the population lives around the coast. Nobody lives in the interior as it is extremely barren and mountainous, parts of it being somewhat desertlike. Occasionally tourists go on safari into the interior but there are no proper roads and these are always impassable for the most part of the year.

Most people think of Iceland as being for the most part of the year covered with snow with below freezing temperature. This however is not so. When I arrived in Iceland in August of 1985 they were experiencing the summer which we had missed out in Ireland. The first day was a bit dull but after that the weather picked up and some of my first letters home were written sitting out in the sun. I don't remember there being any rain for the first couple of weeks - just beautiful clear sunny days. There are not any extremes of weather as such in the south of the country, indeed the weather is quite like our Irish weather except with a lot less rain. During the winter we had the odd snow shower and of course the ground was frozen continually but it was nothing like what I expected, we didn't even have a white Christmas which was a big disappointment for us all. Of course I can only speak for Reykjavik where we lived and the Icelanders said it was a particularly good year weatherwise so maybe I was just lucky. The biggest snowfall I remember was at the beginning of March this year. Getting to work was quite difficult as the snow was almost up to my waist. The snow ploughs were out very quickly and the roads were soon cleared; this lasted for about a month or so and that was the end of the snow. About once a year they have a hurricane. For us it came in November and was very frightening; terribly high wind speeds were recorded, the roofing was ripped off some blocks of flats, cars and buses were blown around, a bus shelter with a concrete base was blown over and many more incidents.

happened. It lasted on and off from Friday to Sunday, Friday being the worst day. All Icelanders will tell you that weatherwise the only thing they are really afraid of is the wind.

Obviously, as is natural during winter the nights become longer and the days shorter. The worst I remember was it being dark until about 11.00a.m. or so and then getting dark again around 3 or 4 depending on the weather. Again I can only talk about what I personally experienced, but up in the north, north east and north west they have continual darkness over the winter months. The sun does actually rise but not very high in the sky and the mountains obstruct it then. It was quite cold over the winter months but I went prepared for the cold so I didn't really notice it that much except maybe an odd time. As I mentioned before the ground was frozen for the winter months and when it did thaw anywhere that there was a lawn or any grass, the grass was actually rotted and the smell walking through it was pretty bad. I remember one beautiful clear freezing cold winter's night when I saw the northern lights in all their glory.

It was a wonderful experience, they really have to be seen to be believed. It was like clouds of all different beautiful colours rolling through the sky changing all the time, it's very hard to describe them well but they are a real miracle of nature.

Iceland has a tremendous travel system. For obvious reasons there are no trains whatsoever. The most popular form of transport is by bus. It's really the best system I ever came across. The buses are always on time to the exact minute.

Only twice I remember the bus being late, once because of a big demonstration on the city and once because of the snow. I remember a few mornings going to work and running around the corner at the last minute saying to myself please God let the bus be a minute late this morning but he never heard my prayer because I could always see the bus vanishing down the road. However, it didn't matter because another one always came along in 15 minutes time. I recall one experience I had in the first few weeks I was in the country: I was coming home from work and not exactly sure of which bus stop to get off at, and naturally I was too shy to ask and we kept going and eventually I landed back at the bus stop where I had got on. I was mortified, I had come the whole way home and had gone half way back into town again. I asked the next time. The bus fare is about the most reasonable cost they have, it was approximately 50p no matter how long or short the journey was. It suited us very well because we lived at just about the farthest point from the city a journey of 25-30 minutes. Their national buses are also very good and very luxurious. A lot of the people fly from one spot to another, this of course is a very good way to travel but not very reliable where the weather is concerned especially flying to the more northern towns.

I mentioned earlier about a volcano which last erupted in 1973. That occurred in an island in a group of islands called the Vestman Islands. The island where it occurred is the only inhabited island in the group - Heimaey. It all started in the middle of the night and for some

reason all the fishing boats were in the harbour that night - it is a fishing community. So the island was very quickly evacuated and the people brought to the mainland. Many of the peoples homes and cars were totally covered with the lava and it proceeded to flow into the sea. Unfortunately there was a problem there, if they did not try to stop the flow then the harbour would be closed which needless to say would have a disastrous effect. So, ingenious as they are, they sprayed thousands of gallons of water on the lava to cool it down and thus stop the flow. This worked and now the harbour is much better than it ever was before. A miraculous thing about that night is that not one person died as a result of the volcano. They lost their homes and everything they had and you would expect them to wish themselves dead almost, but no they're not that sort of people they just went back and built another home. The lava only covered houses in one part of the town but the rest of the island was covered with ashes and stones and all sorts of muck. It took them years to clear all that away. They have left some partly destroyed houses as a reminder of that terrifying night and also for the tourists. The eruption started on January 23rd 1973 and lasted until May of that year, during which time the islanders had to stay on the mainland. I asked one man how he felt about it all - if he was bitter against God and so on. What he said was, if it happened again he hoped it would erupt directly under his house because he couldn't stand living on the mainland in Reykjavik again.

**LARRY O'DOWD**

I was born in Sussex, England in 1916 and came to Ireland at the age of 3. My father was gate-keeper and farm labourer to Templehouse Estate. I went to the National school in Balinacarrow where there were 124 children on the role. We were taught by Mr Bartholemew Hannon and later Miss Sarah Gilmartin. I didn't like school, the only time I really liked it was when I had to pass it on my way to Mass on Sunday where I was compelled to go by my parents. I left school when I was 14 and worked in Templehouse as pantry boy for a time.

During my last year I became a member of the Balinacarrow pipe and drum band where I learned tunes such as 'Finnegans Wake', 'The Minstrel Boy', 'Let Erin Remember', tunes which have been near and dear to me for the last 60 years. I felt quite proud to be a member of the band wearing a green and gold sash, green cap with gold braid and cap badge which consisted of two crossed swords surmounted by the uncrowned harp. We were a highly respectable band as we played tunefully together. We had no tutor and learned from one another. While a member of this band I witnessed the Brennans a family I knew well being evicted and was proud to be there that night to see the roof being finished so they were not one night without a roof over their heads.

'Boycott Parades' were frequent in those days, when the band paraded and marched up and down as

LARRY O'DOWD
Our Local Piper
by Patricia McNally

Introduction

We have living in the 'Corran' district one of the most renowned pipers of our time. Whatever the occasion, concert, ceil, funeral, state event or otherwise, Larry O'Dowd if requested will be there resplendent in uniform and will add colour and music to the scene with a polished performance on his favourite instrument - the warpipes.

Larry is the youngest of 12 children, 7 of them were boys who all fought in the 39/45 war. One of them Martin was killed in action in the North Sea and he was awarded the 'Oak Leaf' for his bravery under fire. Larry himself spent 2 years in a prisoner of war camp.

In this issue of the Corran Herald we would like to include recent interviews with Larry when he spoke of his youth in Ireland, fighting in World War II, his life in England after the war and his eventual return to his native home.

We would like to take this opportunity
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SHANE LOFTUS
AREA REPRESENTATIVE

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ALL OUR CUSTOMERS

F.B.D. INSURANCE P.L.C.

near as possible to the landlords house, beating loudly on the drum. We had few treats in those days but one I recall to mind was the twice yearly trip made to Sligo on the 'CHARABANC' bus which was called the 'Shamrock'. The charabanc was a long single deck soft roof bus, opened at the sides. To ride on this bus was a special treat in that day and age when motorization was in its infancy in this area. The charabanc was the fore-runner of the I.O.C. the Irish Omnibus Company 'or as some people called it 'Ireland's only comfort!'. On these trips to Sligo I always took note of the memorial of Bartholemew Teeling, an Irishman from Co. Antrim both captain and officer in the French army and aide de camp to General Humbert. Teeling with his arm raised in defiance and looking to the glorious previous victory in which he played a prominent part the races of Castlebar. Histroy will recall his noble feat on the grand where he now stands. As an Irishman he paid the supreme sacrifice of death by hanging at Arbour Hill in Dublin Sept 1798 although he was a captain in the french army. The man who met General Humbert and his French expeditionary force in Killcummin strand near Kilalla was General O'Dowd who also paid the supreme sacrifice of death by hanging from a tree outside the town of Ballina.

I asked Larry how he developed an interest in the bag pipes. He told me this story 'One day I was sitting in the kitchen with my mother beannacht De a ainm and I heard the sound of bag pipes so I rushed out and over on the Somerton Road there was a man tuning up his pipes.

He played up and down outside our house and I asked him in for tea. He left his pipes on the dresser, it was the nearest I ever got to bag pipes, I was about 14 at the time. I showed my interest in the pipes and he told me if I wanted to learn to play the pipes to join the British Army, "the Irish Guards play there" he said "The Enniskillen Fusiliers, the Royal Ulster Rifles and the Royal Irish Fusiliers, but if I was you I'd join the Ulster Rifles because they wear black buttons and you won't have to shine then". I thought of this on joining the army but I had to wait my chance which came in 1937. The war being imminent a 2nd batallian was formed so they required another pipe band. A notice appeared on our notice board "Anyone with any previous knowledge of bag pipes give your name into the office" "This I did", recalls Larry "Remembering the day the pipes were left on the dresser. I was sent back to the original batallion who had the pipe band and went on a training course for 3 months. I passed the test in flying colours and from that day to this I have never looked back. The pipes have been my pride and joy and sometimes sorrow.

I joined the army when I was 17. I left home with no money other than the 30s my mother gave to me on leaving. I went to Omagh and so my life in the army began.

The army training was severe, we were being prepared for the world war which was on the cards. I spent 6 months at the depot in Omagh so when I went to England I was well prepared for what lay before me. Discipline was strict at the Depot. Our dally routine was intense. For example, we had to

march for 50 minutes with full pack, break for 10 minutes and take off our equipment. When the whistle blew we had 1 minute to reassemble equipment. One such routine training period I lay against the bank and just undid my buckle, I didn't take my equipment off, our squad commander, a strict disciplinarian, Sgt. Mc Guinness put me on a charge for which I received 7 day C.B. which meant I was confined to barracks for 7 days.

Our training continued in England, where I became the best shot on the range which was a great honour to our platoon, and for which I was awarded a special badge which I proudly wore.

In September 1936 trouble broke out between the Arabs Palestiniens the Jews. We were in Palestine, rushed out on the SS Athenia (the second boat to be sunk by the Germans in '39) and shortly after arival in Palestine a bomb was dropped in the camp. This shook us considerably, but we were now on active service and so had to be prepared for this. We were put on trains from Haifa to Jerusalem and then taken by lorry to a place called Ram Allah (The hill of God) some of our platoon died on active service here I survived due to the fact that I was machine gunner which meant I didn't have to go after the enemy.

The trouble eased and we returned to England and formed the 2nd batallion. It was at this time that I started to learn to play the pipes. The 2nd batallion being Irish could sing, dance and enjoy their culture, and we entertained the English with the culture and heritage they tried to take from us. I was promoted to acting piper by the adjutant and

this meant an extra 6s8d per quarter. I have never regretted my decision to learn the pipes, it was something I loved then and I still do 50 years later. They have accompanied me to many countries and have been the means of helping me to meet many heads of State on both sides of the divide.

And so with World War II in evidence I was acting piper but yet a soldier and in Jan 1938 we were posted overseas to Malta, where we were still holding out when war was declared Sunday 3rd Sept 1939 at 11a.m. Nothing much happened until 10th June 1940 when Italy declared war on the allies. Life on the island from that until Sept 1943 would easily be described as hell on earth. Because I was in charge of the section my job, apart from the military angle, was to see that my men were adequately fed. Our rations were inadequate and we used to 'chip in' and I would go around the town to see what extras I could buy. I have many memories of those days spent in Malta, some I would like to be able to erase from my mind. One memory of an air raid, when a 500lb bomb smashed its way through the Dome of the Catholic church in Mosta, the second largest unsupported dome in the world, and the bomb failed to explode. The local Maltese men went into the Church in their bare feet and carried out the unexploded bomb. To this day this unexploded bomb is a great attraction for tourist and sightseers. Another memory which is still vivid in my mind nearly 50 years on is that of the fate of a group of Scottish conscripts. On one of my walks around the perimeter of the aerodrome I visited an ACK-ACK gun crew all from Scotland. I

was chatting away to them; for a few minutes, then the siren wailed its warning of an air raid. I left the gun crew, so they could prepare for action. I heard the planes on their way into the island so I made for the nearest hole in the ground and crawled into it. Several bombs were dropped one of them I thought was remarkably close. My first thoughts were 'I wonder how they got on up there' and I didn't wait for the all clear to be sounded. I emerged from my fox hole in the ground and proceeded to the gun position to see how the crew were, on my return I spoke to one of them who appeared to be alright but he never answered. He just stood with his back against sand bags and I suddenly realized he was dead. He had died from the blast and his friends had died from the shrapnel, one with his internal organs completely exposed. I said a prayer and cried. It was one of the worst sights I saw during my time in Malta.

Morale was low in Malta at this time. We were hungry because the supply ships were bombed before they reached the island. I was compulsory volunteered with another piper James Robinson from Dungannon to go to Gibraltar and entertain sailors coming back to Malta escorting the convoy of supply ships H.M.S. Cleopatra being the flag ship of the Med fleet was attacked but luckily the mistaken plane was one of our own and as we approached Malta we could see the vast concourse of people who had gathered along the docks to give us a tremendous welcome. We played the Dawning of the Day on the gun turret of the (5.25 dual purpose guns) Faine Geal an lae on approach and that must

have been the sweetest music ever heard by the starving people of Malta. The food had arrived, the first convoy had got through unscathed. As a reward for our service we were the invited guests of honour of Vice Admiral Power, Commander in Chief of the Meditterrean Fleet, the following day which was Christmas 1942. I would write a book on the events that took place on that day alone. In August 1943, we left Malta for Alexandria, the second largest city in Egypt. Our second day at sea a ship less than 100 yds away from our ship suffered a direct hit from a German torpedo (a tin fish), 600 soldiers were lost, the same soldiers who had joined with us in song as we left our docks. We were later told the torpedo was meant for us.

On arrival in Alexandria we were posted to Sidi Bish in the desert. We were given 4 days leave and it was then that I met 2nd lieutenant Goone Booth of Lisadell, nephew of the 'famed Countess Markievicz. I used to practice the tin whistle in a spare tent. One day as I was sat on the desert sand within the tent, the flap was drawn back and I was faced by an officer in full uniform. I immediately jumped to attention. The officer said 'alright carry on', I was very surprised but stood at ease and then we chatted and we discovered we were both from Sligo and we both knew Lisadell and Lieutenant Goone Booth. He told me he was 2nd lieutenant Goone Booth. He then asked me if I could play 'Moonlight in Mayo' telling me it was all the rage at home at this time. I didn't know it so he hummed it for me and I started to play it. I only met him on that one

ocassionas he was shot dead in battle very soon after.

After a battle which lasted ten weeks in Egypt we surrendered. We were taken to Greece and from there to Germany. I shall never forget that journey, we were piled into a cattle wagon with nothing but straw to cushion our long journey. Very soon the straw was gone too. The journey lasted 14 days and we were given nothing to eat but soup and hard biscuits. Christmas 1943 was spent in transit camp with 20,000 other allied prisoners and afterwards we started our internment in Kilcroddy prison camp near Hanover in W. Germany. Food was scarce, we were often hungry. I shall never forget the 'Red Cross' parcels, they were a God send.

April '45 I lead a party of 11 men in an escape from the prison camp. We hid in a railway tunnel, I used to go out in search of food. I remember one day emerging from the tunnel only to be faced by a German soldier. I stood transfixed and merely uttered one word 'sugre (sugar). He put his hand in his satchel and I cupped my hands to receive his entire sugar supply. We were soldiers on opposite sides yet we were both human and knew the pangs of hunger. His supply of sugar ensured the survival of 11 men until they were rescued by the Americans.

In May 1945 we returned to Tilbury docks in England to a tumultuous welcome. I went to my sister in London and from there to my mother in Sussex. I marched up to my mothers' door as I had planned months beforehand playing the wearing of the green. My mother was touched beyond words not really knowing whether I was alive or dead having received word first that I

was missing and later a prisoner of war.

After demobilisation I returned to London where I joined the post office as a postman, a job which I held for 30 years. Then as now my pipes were in frequent use and because of this I met many people of varying rank. In 1950 I led the last tram from South to North London. I played the pipes 600ft above ground level in a hot air balloon over Alexandra Palace. I met Eamonn De Valera at a St. Patrick's night dance held by the National Universities of Ireland (London) club I was chief piper for this occasion for two score and more years. De Valera was chancellor of the National University of Ireland at the time, and as such was chief guest. Well I remember this great occasion when the highest dignitaries of Church and State from England and Ireland were present. Cameras never left De Valera's face throughout his speech, punctuated with hilarious and tremendous applause, as he related incidents which had taken place when he was a rebel for the cause on the run. "What a contrast to the time I was brought over here handcuffed to two big policemen like a felon of our land and now I'm given a police escort, the height of hospitality, all kinds of reverence and - is everything alright sir yes sir - yes sir".

During my years in England I was very much involved with the emigrant Irish I played at feiscanna and ceills all over London.

I retired from the Post Office in Oct 1976 and returned to Ireland in December of the same year, to the house where I was reared. I became associated with feiscanna, concert people and joined a ceill band with Phil McConnell and John Brehony.

When the 50th anniversary of the 1916 rising was approaching I designed a civilian medal and had it struck in real gold and solid silver. I awarded the medal to the winner of a competition I held for the best reciting of the Proclamation. I learned it myself first because I would not expect any child to do what I could not do myself.

On the wall of his living room I noticed a framed diploma, Larry informed me that he achieved this after completing a course at *Culturlann na hEireann* in Dublin for the teaching of traditional music on the tin whistle.

At the age of 72 Larry O'Dowd is still an active member of our community and is present at many functions with his pipes, always shining with the care he takes of his favourite instrument.

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If we allow the use of metal detectors to continue, and one wonders where our politicians are in this regard, our heritage will be decorating the mantelpieces of a few people at home and abroad and the people whose heritage it is will never see the objects, never mind have a chance of learning anything about them.

Farmers can help by not allowing people to use metal detectors on their lands. Irrespective of what protestations and pleadings such users might make, Section 14 of the National Monuments Act of 1930 states that it is not lawful for any person 'to excavate, dig, plough or otherwise disturb the ground within, around or in proximity to any such national monument'.

"Our Heritage we have received from our ancestors to hold in trust for our descendants".

As I mentioned fishing is their way of life but they also catch puffins which are in abundance on the cliffs of the island. It's sad to see such beautiful birds being caught to be eaten but they would probably say the same of us for catching rabbits or hares or whatever. As I mentioned before they are very ingenious, they have run pipes through the volcano and then pump the water through those pipes where it is heated and that gives them all the hot water they need and it will last for another 20 years or more. It's a tough enough climb to the top of the afore mentioned volcano and pretty precarious at times but well worth it when you get to the top because the view is tremendous and you certainly feel on top of the world. The inhabitants of the Westman islands have a hard life but they do not seem to mind - they just get up and live it to the full, but do not ask them to leave their island.

I spent last Christmas in Iceland. It was much the same as Christmas anywhere else but there were slight differences, sad differences really, sad in the way that there were tremendous celebrations but they didn't know and seem to care that they were celebrating the birth of Christ. They had Christmas trees and presents and thousands of Christmas lights but one lady told me 'we did not go to church because we were too busy preparing the meal, but we watched the service on the television.' So their Christmas is rather materialistic. However, they don't have a turkey and ham and pudding and rich Christmas cake but we managed to get a turkey and between Christmas cakes and puddings sent to us from home we had a great feast and a real

Irish Christmas. Naturally we were all homesick, who isn't at Christmas - but we were all in the same boat so we had to make the best of it. We had a beautiful Mass at midnight which in a way was the saddest part but then we went home and had the tea and the Christmas cake etc. Here I must mention that I celebrated my 21st birthday on the Christmas eve and I was given a fabulous day and at Midnight Mass it was even mentioned and needless to say I nearly fell through the floor but all in all I enjoyed my Christmas there.

In the natural course of events new year usually follows quickly on the heels of Christmas, the new year being 1986. The Icelanders go in a lot for fireworks and on new years eve we were treated to a tremendous fireworks display. As it was my first time ever to see fireworks I really enjoyed it and we had the added advantage that we lived on a hill sort of overlooking the city so we had a bird's eye view of everything. They spend thousands of pounds on fireworks but it all goes to charity which is great. The funny thing is that that's the only time of the year when there is any smoke or pollution as such over the city. You see Reykjavik literally means Smokeless City and there is little or no pollution of any kind in the country so the sky is brilliantly blue and the air is as clear and healthy as you would find anywhere. The days also seem longer and brighter and it also enhances the beauty of the countryside.

Their native tongue naturally is Icelandic though the majority know a little English. The language they speak now has not changed much through the centuries. There is a slight hint of

Irish; a number of words are in fact the same in Irish as Icelandic, and one or two placenames have a distinctly Irish flavour e.g. Patreksfjörður, Breidafjörður and so on. The odd bit of English they speak is spoken in a variety of accents, the children pick up a lot of words from television and video programmes - not always good of course, but that's life. We had to do our part naturally and learn a bit of the language. It's a rather difficult language to learn and the grammar is a bit complicated but we managed to learn a few phrases and words and could understand a little. On occasion if a few of us were anywhere together, usually on the bus going to or coming from work, we would start speaking in Irish for the fun and looks we got were something else. If we spoke English it would be one thing but this Irish was completely alien to them and indeed very handy for us. I remember one day an American girl and myself were visiting this old lady in a country town. She was originally from Germany and hadn't a word of English so between a mixture of a few words of German that I have and our Icelandic, we managed to get through to her what we were about. But I had to laugh when I thought about it afterwards - two girls from Rhode Island and Ballymote respectively trying to communicate with a German lady in a country town in Iceland! Little did I ever think a few years ago that I would see myself in such a situation.

When you arrive in Iceland you land in the international airport which is in the American base at Keflavik which is approximately an hour's drive from Reykjavik. There are two American bases there, that being the

largest one with a few thousand personnel and the other on the east coast with a couple of hundred Americans. They are mainly naval bases and are like two little separate American states. They have almost everything that they would get at home and there is little intercommunication between Icelanders and Americans. In fact, some Icelanders resent their presence there, but as Iceland has no army or navy of their own I guess they have to put up with it. Iceland has a coast guard service to protect its fishing rights which were infringed by the British in the 1950's and which resulted in the Cod War. However, there have been no major infringements since then.

At first when I went to Iceland I felt like it was definitely the back of beyonds, the middle of nowhere. I couldn't understand the radio or the television or read the newspapers and I thought 'if something happens on the other side of the world we won't know about it for days', but between learning the little bit of Icelandic and listening to the American radio station transmitting from the base, we were kept well in touch. In fact on a number of occasions we even got RTE both 1 and 2 on the radio, usually pretty late at night, and were right up on the Irish news those days. They have naturally their own newspapers, radio stations and television station - one television station which could be as well done without. It's usually on for 5 hours in the evening and that's all. They take the evening off on a Thursday and there is no television at all that day. Up to a couple of years ago the television people used to take the whole month of July off for their summer holidays so

there was no television all that time. They have all their Icelandic programmes and quite a lot of English and American shows and films. They have very good cinemas and get all the latest films quite quickly. There are discos of course but very few pubs, about three in Reykjavik itself. Naturally there are lounges in the hotels but they drink quite a lot at home. Smoking is banned in all public places, in shops, cinemas and on public transport. There is quite a problem with teenage drinking, and drugs are becoming a problem also. So far there is very little vandalism and the crime rate is extremely low. One house where I used to work was broken into while the owners were on holiday and it was like the nine day wonder; everybody was talking about it because it is such an uncommon thing to happen. Very few muggings etc., but it is believed that there is quite a high incidence of suicide especially among young people.

Another thing I thought going out there was that this country is on the edge of Europe and they wouldn't have any idea of fashion or anything like that, but was I ever wrong? They are terribly fashionable and could stand up to Paris or London fashion houses any day. Even the very young wore designer labels. I remember going to work on the bus in the mornings and looking at all those people like as if they had just walked off the pages of a fashion magazine at that hour of the morning, and me after crawling out of bed and half asleep.

One fault I found in Iceland was the lack of moral standards. Divorce and abortion are legal and available and they think nothing of sleeping around. Parents will permit their son's or daughter's partner

to spend the night without it costing them a thought. This I firmly believe is all due to the lack of religion in the country. God is not important in their lives, they have no time for him and only turn to him when they are in difficulty, so our job was to try and teach them some little thing about God in the hope that it will lead to their wanting to receive instruction and then enter the Catholic church. What I have mentioned above is not true of every Icelander but is definitely true of the vast majority.

Another thing about the Icelanders is that no matter who or what you are, you are known as, somebody's son or daughter by means of your surname. Take for example Magnus Magnusson of Mastermind fame who is Icelandic: his father's name was obviously Magnus, therefore his is Magnusson and his son in turn will be Magnusson or his daughter Magnúsdóttir. If I was Icelandic I would be Colette Jónsdóttir as my Father's name is John. The women keep their own names when they get married so you could have 3 or 4 of the same family living in the house all with different surnames, slightly confusing you will agree.

I spent nine months in Iceland and it was a rare and wonderful experience and I would recommend it to anyone, but I don't think I would live there permanently.

HERITAGE GROUP DRAW

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