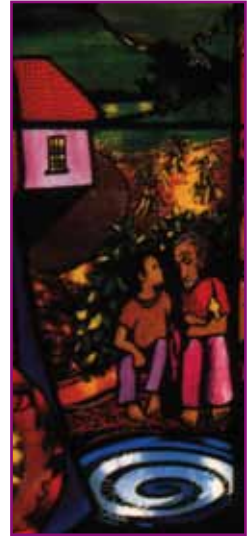


## CHAPTER SIX

### SITTING AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATION

**B**y this time young Edmund, as a twelve year old, has as his mentor and companion the 'Little Grey Friar', or Patrick Grace, who had arrived in the town and was housed in the local Augustinian monastery. Ill health had forced a postponement in his studies on the continent for the priesthood and so he returned to Callan to renew his acquaintance with the Rices. Here was an opportunity for young Edmund to gain more formal and informal education from this erstwhile travelling schoolmaster. Desmond Kyne, the iconographer, in one of his little panels on Edmund Rice, the child, has him sitting with the Little Grey Friar by the side of a well imbibing the waters of learning and wisdom. This well-setting provides us with a good opportunity for exploring how Edmund would have been interested to fit the traditional ways of knowing with the new world, including its city government and the red-coats. He had also been informed of the city commerce and was growing interested in it, particularly as his uncle Michael had been speaking to the family about it. A new spirituality was emerging as well, being brought over with all those who had studied on the continent. There was beginning a Catholic Revival now that the penal provisions were not as stringent. One of these new devotions was the Cinctured Confraternity of our Lady of Consolation encouraging young boys to participate more wholeheartedly when they served



*Desmond Kyne's depiction of Edmund and The Little Grey Friar. Springs and wells have always been seen as holy places emitting great wisdom.*



*The waters of learning as they are today.*

at Mass. For Edmund and his brothers, particularly John, who was later to become an Augustinian, there was the regular ritual of getting up at first light to serve in the double thatched building which served as a chapel once restrictions on Roman Catholic worship were lifted.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine the chat that transpired between young Edmund and his mentor over this three-year period

before Edmund went off to Kilkenny for his commercial schooling.

Edmund: Brother Patrick, I like serving at Mass the way you taught us. It is good to get close to Jesus like that—it's like receiving him in Holy Communion. I feel Jesus is close at that time. In some ways I would like to be at Mass all the time. But I don't think Ma would like it. She would want me to do the milking. So—

<sup>1</sup> Br Leonard O'Toole has not left a stone unturned in his seeking out the devotional practices and religious books available to the Callan and Waterford Catholics of the period in his double volume set A. L. O'Toole, *More Than Gold or Silver*, Two vols., vol. One, *A Spiritual Profile of Edmund Ignatius Rice* (Bristol: The Burleigh press, 1984), A. L. O'Toole, *Rooted in Love*, vol. 2, *A Spiritual Profile of Edmund Ignatius Rice* (Bristol: Burleigh Press Ltd., 1985).

Little Grey Friar: What a wonderful pious thought, Edmund! All right, out with it! What do you want to know this time?



*Altar serving - getting a feel for the closeness of God.*

Edmund: Aw gee! Br Patrick, I thought you would have been quite impressed with that. It's pretty close to being true, you know. There is a good feeling about being at Mass. But, yes, I have been thinking of that story of the little girl with the injured leg and how her mother cured her. Is it true do you think? Or is it make-up stuff from the past?

Little Grey Friar: So which side of you wants to know? The side that does the arithmetic and works out things? You're pretty good at that and you'll be following in the footsteps of your uncle before you know where you are. Or is there another side to you which you're not quite so sure about? A side that contains all the memories your mum and dad grew up with and all the mums and dads before them.



*Edmund being introduced to story-telling and poetry as a necessary part of learning his heritage. We see it today as balancing left and right brain ways of thinking.*

Edmund: Which side's that? I didn't know we had two sides to ourselves?

Little Grey Friar: Didn't you now? So how come it's only when we're around the fire that we tell such stories? Or out in the fields around the mounds? Or at this well here? Why does the poet speak poetry? Or why are some stories best left in the old tongue and not this new English? Or why do you imagine Jesus to be close to you when you serve? Why did Jesus speak poetry?



*Edmund being given a lesson in imagination. It would come in very handy later.*

Edmund: Jesus? I didn't think he did—he told stories.

Little Grey Friar: That's exactly it—and they weren't just stories anyway. Can you imagine anyone being as good as the Good Samaritan? Now I've given the answer away!

Edmund: What answer? You're after losing me here.

Little Grey Friar: You're looking for answers and I'm looking for a way of knowing. The answer I'm referring to is *imagination*.

Edmund: Eh? You mean like imagining that cow over there knows what we're saying and can talk to us?

Little Grey Friar: No—well, it probably knows much more than you think—but, no, I mean much more when I'm talking about imagination.



*Isaac Newton needed his imagination just as much Rose!*

You see, there are different ways of knowing. You think you're getting too old for fairies and all that sort of talk. Well, if you are you're losing something very precious. You're reduced to believing only what's obvious to your two eyes. You heard that apple just now. All you know is that it hit the ground. Just recently a smart fella named Isaac Newton, or so they say, worked out all sorts of mathematics—a bit more than your add-ups—to explain about that apple falling. You see the sight of an apple falling made him think about all sorts of things. Not that he was in charge of the thinking, mind you, he just allowed his thoughts free rein. This is imagination too. It is not so much what we do but something that comes to us. Now what the poets do—and what Jesus did—was use our words as tools for saying something which is pretty mysterious. What Jesus wanted to tell us with the Good Samaritan might seem pretty straightforward but it isn't. Your closest friend would hardly spend all that much time and money looking after you as the Good Samaritan did. If you came across Cromwell lying beaten up by the side of the road what would you do?

Edmund: I know what Da would do—he'd give him a good boot—and then put him on his horse! But back in Cromwell's day a Catholic wouldn't be allowed to own a decent horse—the Protestants would take it off

him. Thank God things are a bit better today. Ma is always feeding anybody who comes to the door. I would like to do that much anyway. I realise we're a lot better off than most Catholics, so I'd feel pretty bad if I couldn't do at least that much.

Little Grey Friar:

OK, I just wanted to get you thinking a bit—or imagining really— what the possibilities were for opening up to those who are poor. To be generous to those who have nothing—or very little—is to know that what you give won't be returned. That makes us mingy and we only give what we won't really miss. When we give so much that it makes us poor then we're getting a bit like what Christ meant.



Jesus told a story about a Samaritan who helped a man who had

*The Good Samaritan. Jesus painted a picture of the extraordinary lengths we can go to in helping our neighbour. There is no room here for being satisfied and thinking 'I've done enough'.*

Edmund:

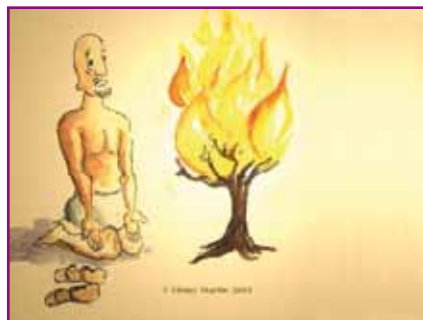
That's a hard thing to do. You might as well not work at all. I know we help people a lot but I don't think we go that far.

Little Grey Friar:

Well, that's something to think about. But, I'm not answering your question too well am I? You ask a lot of questions and you want answers. What I'm trying to say is that it's not so easy to talk about some things. And I don't expect you will want to talk about these things to others either—except if the moment is just right and what you say will be listened to properly. Remember when Moses heard this voice as he was looking at the burning bush which was not getting burnt up?

Edmund:

Yes, it said: "Take off your shoes you're standing on sacred ground." That was God speaking wasn't it?



*What makes the ground sacred? How do we have eyes to see the burning bush in our own situation?*

Little Grey Friar:

But why did God say the ground was sacred? Was it because God was there—and didn't you learn in your catechism that God is everywhere?—or because God was going to reveal to him something very precious—something which would give life to his people?

Edmund: Didn't think of that. I suppose what happened to the people afterwards when they escaped from Pharaoh and crossed the Red Sea made the burning bush event extra special and that's why he had to take off his sandals. It would help him to remember meeting God.

Little Grey Friar: OK, now this is where you need to imagine things. Take the ghost story about the little girl, the fairies and her dead mother who appeared to her in spirit. Can you feel there was something in the air for the little girl to experience all that? To somebody on the outside they would not have noticed anything different. But she had been sensitised. Where had she come from?

Edmund: She had just been to Mass.

Little Grey Friar: Right. You know and I know how special the Mass is for us now. We've only just been allowed to have it more openly. Only now can the priest show his face. We don't have to worry about the informers. But we still have it in something of a whisper as if it were a secret service. And when we know how much of a sacrifice it has been to have it then we appreciate its specialness. Now I can imagine that little girl taking the Mass with her, if you like, and feeling that God and



*The presence of angels is strong in the Bible. They are both messengers of God and a sign of spiritual protection. The spirit of evil was also very present. Persecution was one of the manifestations of it.*

the angels are round about her. But there are bad angels too—evil forces—and they can be even more eerie. So it's natural then that she would struggle with these different forces. And of course her mother is still very close to her. This is very strong in our story, as you would know from what happens on Hallowe'en. I'll tell you a bit more about that another day.

Anyway, there's your mother now and I've got to go myself. The important thing to realise is that God is close and Jesus and Mary and the saints will look after you and keep you from harm. But you must pray hard and be a good boy—promise?

### THE THINNESS BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE OTHER WORLD

That night as Edmund was being tucked in by his mother they had quite a chat about what had transpired with the Little Grey Friar. It made Mary reflect half to herself and half aloud that they were lucky to have their beloved friar back in their midst. From his school master days he had a good sense of what life used to be like and could pray with the people. The trouble with some of the newer priests coming over from France and Spain was that they brought different customs with them. They prayed as if God were a long way away and we had to say plenty of prayers to keep in touch. “Anyway enough of that I’ll be giving you bad ideas. So what do you say? You pray first then I’ll pray.”



Ghost stories, especially at Samhain (Halloween) time were both entertaining as well as a warning against leaving the safety of the home at night time.

*“I lie down with my dear God, began Edmund, “May my dear God lie with me, the two hands of God about my waist, a cross of angels over me from head to sole, tonight and until a year from tonight, and tonight itself.”<sup>2</sup>*

Mary followed this with: *“May God bless you, child. I put you under the protection of Mary and her Son, under the care of Brigid and her cloak, and under the shelter of God tonight.”<sup>3</sup>*

Young Edmund was looking forward to his next encounter with the Little Grey Friar and urgently tugged him by the sleeve towards their favourite meeting place, the well near the apple tree. “You promised to tell me some more ghost stories to do with Hallowe’en.”

The Little Grey Friar: Hey not so fast, young man! All



*The coming of the Milesians to Ireland. The compromise they made with the Tuatha de Danann became material for many ghost stories.*

right, but before we get too carried away there’re a few things you need to know first. You know, don’t you, that the Church thought it would be a good idea to place the Feast of All Saints and All Souls on November 1st and 2nd that happens to coincide with the old pagan feast of Samhain. That’s because the memory of the people goes deep and they have an awful fear around those days of the people from the Otherworld crossing back over to this world and causing all sorts of disturbances and kidnapping the young men and so on and so forth—this was to provide men for the banshee, the women who live in the Otherworld. You know about the Tuatha de Danann don’t you.

<sup>2</sup> Pat Fairon, *Irish Blessings*, trans. Padraig O hAdhmaill (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1992) 56. As the author states these prayers come from a long oral tradition gathered by Douglas Hyde, and published as *Religious Songs of Connacht* in 1906; and Dharmuid O Laoghaire in his book *Ar bPaidreacha Duchais*. They parallel the famous Scottish collection of hymns and incantations, *Carmina Gadelica* gathered by Alexander Carmichael from 1855-1899, and recently edited by Esther De Waal as *The Celtic Vision*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 44.

Edmund: Sure, about how they worked out an agreement with the Milesians when they fought with them and in a sort of honourable draw they decided to take the land under the land while the Milesians could have what was on top. That's what you said didn't you?

The Little Grey Friar: That's about it. And I told you over time they have acquired a god-like dimension to themselves. They hold us in debt to them for fertility and good seasons. That is why you little kids go around from house to house on Hallowe'en asking for coins and nuts and fruit. You represent them, you see. Therefore you are not in danger. It is the



*Ghost stories had a very important part to play in making the hearer more sensitive to the thinness between this world and the other world. It was an easy step then to appreciate the Great Spirit in its three-fold naming as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

adults who have more to look out for. Not so long ago. If someone wanted to do a dastardly deed and get rid of somebody he didn't like, this was the time to do it, as the police would not be too keen to find out, being a bit fearful themselves. So that's some of the background to this story that happened a long time ago. It's a very ancient story called EATHRA NERA. It probably goes back to the 8th or 9th century.<sup>4</sup>

It was Samhain, and at the palace of Ailill and Maeve, King and Queen of Connaught, at Rath Cruachan in the present day county Roscommon the fires blazed and a supper was being prepared. Two men had been hanged that day and King Ailill offered a prize to whoever was daring enough to go out in the darkness of the night and to tie a twig around one of the dead man's legs. Seven of those present went out, one by one, into the darkness to attend the task. But came in again hurriedly, as the night was full of spectres and demons. Then NERA, one of the bravest, went out and tried to tie a twig around one of the dead men's legs. The dead man spoke and told him how to do it properly. So there you have the tale – he is dead and yet he is not dead. It is the in-between, Samhain, it isn't summer and it isn't winter. It's the threshold period, it's like a threshold – you're not inside and you're not outside, you know, this is the feature of the thing.

Then the dead man asked NERA to carry him on his back to a house where he would get a drink of water as he had been very thirsty when he was hanged. There was a ring of fire around the first house they came to and so they couldn't enter. The hanged man explained that the people of that house had been careful to practice the ancient

4 Sean O'Duinn, "The Sacred Feasts of the Celtic Calendar" (paper presented at the Celtic Vision - A Conference on Celtic Spirituality, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, 1998). The story is also to be found in Caitlin and John Matthews, *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Element, 1994) 343-7, quoting from *Revue Celtique*, vol 10

custom of covering the fire with ashes at night and this served to protect the house against Otherworld attack. The next house had a ring of water around it and they could not enter there. The hanged man explained that the people had been careful to throw out any dirty water before going to bed. NERA took the hanged man on his back to the third house, which had neither fire nor water around it and there they entered. There was plenty of dirty water inside in a tub, the hanged man drank some of it and squirted the rest of it on the faces of those in the house and killed them all. Then NERA took the dead man back to the gallows and hanged him up again!

NERA then set out to return to Rath Cruachan to collect his price from the King. But, as he approached, he saw a fearful sight. The *dun*, or fort was on fire and the Tuatha de Danann had come out from their *sid* or fairy dwelling, inside a cave of Cruachan and had cut off the heads of his friends. The Tuatha de Danann were just then returning inside the *sid* and NERA slipped in after them. He was, of course, discovered and brought before the King of the *sid* who treated him kindly. He was given the daily task of bringing firewood for the fire and he was given a beautiful *banshee* for his wife. He noticed a well in the *sid* and every morning a blind man came carrying a lame man on his back. When they arrived at the well, the blind man would ask, is it there? And the lame man on his back would answer, "it is there". Then they would go home again. NERA asked his wife what they were up to. And she told him that they were the official guardians of the King's very precious crown, which was kept in the well. The blind man could not see it to steal it. And the lame man could see it, all right, but he was too lame to run away with it. His wife also told him that the King and Queen and his friends in Rath Cruachan had not been killed at all. That it was a *suilfrain*, an illusion, but that the Tuatha de Danann had planned to kill them next *Samhain*. She said that he should go out and warn them of this and to come and attack the *sid* before the *sid* attacked them. NERA went out and passed on this message. He brought the summer flowers of the *sid* with him to convince them. It was, of course, the heart of winter in the human world, but it was summer in the Otherworld. NERA and his wife and family went out and the humans attacked the *sid* and confiscated its treasure. Then NERA, his wife and family, with all the cattle, took up residence in the *sid* once more and they were never seen again.

Edmund: Great story that! No wonder people get scared to wander around after sunset at Hallowe'en time. They are funny people too!  
Fancy a dead man telling someone to tie the twig properly!

The Small Grey Friar: Now, Edmund I didn't want to tell you this story just as a ghost story. There are two things I want you to remember about it—but enjoy the story as well. First, you see the old Irish feeling for the thinness between this world and the Otherworld. At these Celtic feasts, especially Samhain and Beltaine, the veil between the two worlds is sort of lifted and people can travel between the two. Mother Church in her wisdom is mindful of this sense among her people. When she preaches Christ to the people she preaches the Christ who is Lord of heaven and earth, in other words Lord of this world and the Otherworld. If we believed strongly enough we would have no need to fear what anybody either in this world or the Otherworld could do. But because our faith is sometimes weak and the dark is strong and the stories are still being told, then many people are still frightened. That's why we sprinkle holy water in the house and over ourselves, and we say prayers asking for Christ's protection. The other thing we must realise is that the people of the land are very aware of



the mystical feel of the land and what surrounds it. They tread carefully and build in the right places and reverence the spirits who are part of this land. True, this can lead to people being too fearful, but it has always meant that God has been very close to them. Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the Trinity—are not just something you talk about. You have to know that they are right with you guiding and guarding you at every step.

Edmund: I can see where this can be very true here at Westcourt where the land is still rich with meaning from the past and the mounds are still around us. But what of the towns and cities where people go about their business as if they don't know about any other world? They have no fear except if someone robs them or the redcoats take a dislike to them. What then? Because I have been doing well in school Ma and Da want me to work with my Uncle Michael in his supplying business. None of this will matter any more. It will all be about ships, horses and cattle, and buildings and all sorts of people and everybody talking English. Actually, they are going to take me down to Waterford very soon to give me a look at what's there and see if it will be OK for me. I can't wait!

The Little Grey Friar: Well now young fella, here's some homework to do while you're away. Here's a book on the lives of the Celtic Saints beginning with St Patrick. Have a read of those and we'll talk about them when you come back. I have a sense that there's some learning from these people that will come in handy for you when you live in the city. We'll talk about some of the Celtic heroes too like Cúchulainn and see if they have got something to say to you as well. In the meantime keep your eyes and ears open and enjoy yourself.

### **HUMPHREY O'SULLIVAN'S PICTURE OF CALLAN—LIFE AND DEATH**

While Edmund was away life went on as usual around Westcourt. These were the different layers of events which curled around and impacted on anyone keen enough to observe and store away in some sort of collective memory which would influence one when the time was right. Again our source is Humphrey O'Sullivan who had an eye for the comings and goings of the Callan area. He seemed to be particularly sensitive to the innocent joys of youth, the beauty of the changing seasons and the farming activities and religious festivals associated with them. However, he was also moved to anger by the oppression and poverty which were to be seen at every turn and would flare up in ugly fashion from time to time. Some of his entries in his diary reveal these things sometimes sparingly and at other times with poignant detail:

April 8th A quiet pleasant Sunday morning. Just a few thin clouds to be seen stirring. Fog on the hills and mountains... A beautiful evening. Went for a walk down the Mionnán Road, through the Damhasc meadow, to the lime kiln and from there to the Weir. On my way home I heard on every side the thrush, the lark, and every other bird singing to



*Humphrey O'Sullivan, who lived close to Edmund Rice's time had a deep appreciation for the beauty of rural Ireland. Its attraction allowed him to see God so clearly in it.*

each other. The youths and girls of the town were out walking through the meadows along by the King's River. Went to vespers at the Brothers' Chapel where I heard heavenly music.

April 12th I hope the people's hearts will soften. Three hundred families in Callan are starving.

April 13th A rich land and a poor people. I ask you a question. Why is this?

April 14th The paupers have light hearts as they expect a bite of meat tomorrow. The country people are gathering in for the market. The country cabin-dwellers eat meat on only three days a year, Christmas Day, Shrove Tuesday, and Easter Sunday.

For Humphrey himself Easter was indeed a festival day as his description of it shows:

15th Easter Sunday: A beautiful day. At midday five of us left Callan to go to Desart Court. We went prancing through the lord's wood until we arrived at the fish ponds at Desart Court. There is a very



*Living conditions for a majority of the Irish people remained abysmal. This drawing of a peasant cottage in the west was made during the 1780s.*

*Humphrey was also very mindful of the suffering of the poor. However, it was the poor who were the carriers of much of the folklore. It was seen as a treasure denied the rich.*

beautiful view of the countryside from this pleasant mansion. A heat haze. The mountains to the south were dark blue. All around us were thick forests with leafless ash and oak growing among the ever green pine. The meadows as smooth as silk or satin and as green as corn in the blade. It is an earthly paradise. We stopped at Butler's where we got white loaves, rich bacon, sweet mutton, white pudding, and a drop of the barley juice to drink from the pretty hostess. We went off home in good spirits—as fine an evening as I ever saw.

April 16th Easter Monday or Easter-Eggs Day. A bright sunny calm morning. At mid-day the young girls and young men eating their eggs and drinking in the hostelries. Evening, and the hostelries still full of young people. A very fine day.

April 17th                    *Long as the drinking lasts, it ends in thirst. It's sweet drinking, it's bitter paying.* The street mob were very noisy at three in the morning. Some of them are still very drunk. It's no harm to call them 'mob' (*coip*) for they are the froth (*coipeadh*) of the lake dwellers, bog-dwellers, and dirty mountain-dwellers with no respect or manners.  
[Methinks Humphrey did not get a good night's rest!]

In such vein Humphrey presents wonderful word pictures of youth dancing around bonfires on the eve of summer solstice and the carry-over of rituals of Beltaine when bright fire were lit and dedicated to the sun god Bel. It merges into the feast of St John the Baptist. Likewise for the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul he describes a great game of hurling:

June 29th                    Feast of St Peter and Paul. A holiday. Hurling on the Fair Green. It was a good game. The sticks were being brandished like swords. Hurling is a warlike game. The west side won the first match and the east the second. You could hear the sticks striking the ball from one end of the Green to the other. The well-to-do young men and women were strolling up and down on the Green and on the level causeway in the centre.

However, by the next year a great sadness comes over him. It becomes a prelude to a similar tragedy which will impact on the life of our main character in his adult years:

July 28th                    I sat up all night with my wife who is ill. The call of the corncrake is lonely.

July 30th                    My wife is very ill. May Almighty God cure her. My poor children will suffer a great loss if she dies suddenly. One's end is sleep, and a woman wakes her own corpse. She sleeps badly. Her leg is paining her. She is failing greatly.

July 1st                      Raining all the morning from day-break until ten o'clock. A calm north eastern wind. Showery at the close of day, with a lively cold north-west wind. Now, at this moment, at eleven o'clock at night my wife died, having received Extreme Unction, by the will of God.

July 2nd                      A fine thin-clouded sunny day. A mild west wind. I was never alone until this day.

July 3rd                      Incessant rain up to five o'clock, with a slight north wind. I buried my wife in Uachtar Rátha. I never felt alone until the day the grave was dug. My eldest son, Donncha is sad and sorrowing, but as regards the other three orphans, they don't know their loss.

July 5th                      Sunday dinner was lonely without Máira, my wife. My youngest son almost got killed today by the blow of a stone on the temple. He was struck by a child with no sense. Ill-fortune rarely comes alone.

On that sad note we must leave Humphrey whose grieving left nearly a month's diary unwritten. It paves the way for another grieving in the future but for now we must return to young Edmund full of the comings and goings of his visit to Waterford.

## YOUNG EDMUND'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF WATERFORD

The Little Grey Friar: Well, now, isn't your man like a cat on a hot tin roof, bees' knees and ants in your pants! What was it like mixing with the quality<sup>5</sup> in the bustling metropolis of Waterford?

Edmund: Just grand, Brother! First there's the smell of the sea and the flapping of sails and groaning of ropes and sailors as they compete with one another. Uncle Michael would take me down every day to see the



*Edmund's first trip to Waterford revealed the gap between the rich (the 'quality') and the poor. The mansions then have become the luxury accommodation of today's tourists!*

supplies being loaded on board the ships going everywhere. Then he would take me over the hill to the cattle market where there were all sorts of people haggling over what would be a good price for the cattle. Yuk! I didn't like the smell much—it's not like a farm smell at all. There's death in the air down there where they slaughter the cattle and burn what can't be sold. It stinks!

The Little Grey Friar: And what about all the people. What's it like being amongst the city dwellers?

Edmund: Yeah, there's all sorts there. There's soldiers galore marching up and down and keeping everyone in order. Uncle told me that many of those wearing the red coats were Irish like ourselves. Nobody likes them and reckon they're traitors. But Uncle says they only do it to be able to feed their kids. The quality look real grand in their flash clothes and smart horses and carriages. Uncle showed me up New Street<sup>6</sup> where some of them live. They like to be seen these people. And the shops are really alive with people moving in and out buying flash clothes or fancy decorations for their houses. Actually, Uncle is not doing too badly himself. He says that he, like a number of Catholics, are what he calls the merchant class. They are not allowed to be doctors and lawyers. So they make their money doing what the Establishment people won't do. He reckons it's because they want to



*The 'Redcoats' were an unmistakable sign of a people oppressed.*

5 The term used then to depict the upper classes.

6 The peace and quiet of New Street will be disturbed by Edmund in due course.

keep us poor. But with the war going on in France and the British getting nervous about their own position there is plenty to be made in shipping and provisioning. They call it blood money. But it's honestly got, so Uncle says, and it's giving us Catholics a bit more say in what goes on.

The Little Grey Friar: And where did you go to Mass?

Edmund: Well, there were three places really. One is a thatched chapel just outside the walls of the city called the Faha Chapel. It's not meant to look like a church but it is. And the second one was close to Uncle's offices in the city, called Trinity Within. That's because, unlike the Faha Chapel, it was built

within the walls of the city—they were built by the Normans and are still rock solid. The third one, which they call the New Chapel was built by the Jesuits and we used to go there most of all. There is a balcony that goes right round the chapel except for the altar and we would be up there. The poor people would be down in the bottom part.



*New Chapel with its balcony going right around the church.*

### **POVERTY RAISES ITS UGLY HEAD**

The Little Grey Friar: Aha! I was wondering when you were going to mention them. I thought everybody must be rich there, the way you spoke. Are there some poor people in the towns as well as out here?

Edmund: Thousands more! They're everywhere begging in the streets by day and herded into the back streets at night by the soldiers. They look awful! Oh, and the kids are wild as well. If they're not fighting one another they are calling out and making fun of you. They've got sores all over them and runny noses and rags for clothes almost falling off them. They kick the dogs and bait the bulls hoping they will stampede through the streets so that they can cheer and carry on even wilder.



*Edmund observed the gulf between rich and poor in Waterford.*

The Little Grey Friar: Mm, I begin to get the picture.

Edmund: What do you mean: you begin to get the picture? You know very well what it's like—you've been there yourself, I bet. Anyway, what did you give me a book on the Celtic saints for when I was in Waterford? That's the opposite of where the saints seemed to live. They seemed to live in beautiful forest areas, or wild windswept islands. What's that got to do with living in a city?

The Little grey Friar: OK calm down—you're like a sailing ship under full sail in a storm. We've obviously hit a bit of a nerve here. Methinks you might turn into something yet, young fella.

Edmund: I'm not sure why I felt angry then. It's not fair that some people have all the money and others have none. But what can you do? I know what some do. They give up and just get drunk. There are plenty of them around the streets. They look disgusting. And I feel sorry for those who have to beg for a living too. The funny thing was I had forgotten about the poor side of Waterford when I came home. I remembered the fine buildings and the nice clothes on the rich people. Why can't everybody share what they have so that nobody is hungry? That's what I would like to see.

### WHAT THE SAINTS OFFER FOR OUR LEARNING

The Little Grey Friar: Which brings me to my point about why I wanted you to read about the Celtic saints. Sure, it would seem that where they lived and how they lived and the miracles they worked is not much different from the fairy tales we grow up with. But I think there is another way at looking at them which might be helpful. So let's start at the beginning. With St Patrick.

Edmund: I know he is the one who made Ireland Christian and that he was first captured as a boy and brought here as a slave and when he escaped he heard in a dream that the people were crying out for him and that's why he came. And that he was cheeky and beat the Druids to it in lighting the Easter fire. And that he seemed to have a way with the girls, because he got so many of them to become nuns! You said before that he spoke about God and Christ in ways that appealed to the people. What else do I need to know?



The Little Grey Friar All right I'll tell you a story about him which I think will have a message for you—or for anybody who lives in the city—but let me tell the story first. I'll try to say it the way it was told to me by an old country farmer as a Lughnasa story:<sup>7</sup>

*An icon of St Patrick in the Orthodox tradition. It depicts a revered figure but we have to delve into the stories surrounding him to learn of his encounters with the pagans.*

[St Patrick had some men working for him] and

<sup>7</sup> Collected and published by Douglas Hyde (1915) and quoted in Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (Dublin: Oxford University Press, 1962) 439-40.

they asked the saint for meat, for they were working very hard. Some of them said that they heard that Black Cormac, a pagan chief, had a bull to sell cheaply. The saint sent for Cormac and asked him how much would he be wanting for the bull. Now it was a savage bull that had killed many people and, since Cormac hated the saint with a great hatred, he hoped the bull would kill him, and he told him, 'You can have the bull for nothing if you go yourself for him.' 'I'm very thankful to you,' said the saint, 'I'll go for him in the evening when I'll have my work done.'



*The bull, often a symbol of resistance, is docile to Patrick's influence but becomes the downfall of Black Cormac with his greedy disposition.*

That evening the saint went to Black Cormac's house and asked him to show him the field where the black bull was. He was greatly delighted and said, 'Follow me; the walk is not a long one.' He brought the saint down to a breen, and showed him the bull in the field and said to him, 'Take him with you now if you can.' The saint went into the field, and when the bull saw him it raised its head and tail in the air and came towards him in anger. He raised his crozier (bishop's staff) and made the sign of Christ between himself and the bull. The bull lowered his head and his tail and followed the saint as quiet as a lamb.

When the saint came home he killed the bull and told the men, 'Take the flesh with ye, but leave the skin and bones.' They took the flesh with them and ate it.

A week after that Black Cormac came to the saint and said, 'I hear people saying that you are an honest man, but I know you have done me a great wrong.' 'How so?' said the saint. 'About my meal and my bull,' said he. 'I gave you your own bargain for the meal, and as for your bull, you can have it back if you wish it.'

'How could I get it back, and it eaten by you and your workmen?' said Black Cormac.

The saint called for Fintan and told him, 'Bring me the skin and bones of the bull and he prayed over them, and in a moment the bull leapt up as well as ever he was. 'Now,' said the saint, 'take your bull home with you.'

Black Cormac was greatly surprised, and when he went home he told the neighbours that it was an enchanter the saint was, and that his own bull was a blessed bull, and that it was proper that the people should worship it. They believed that, and they said they would come on Sunday morning.

The saint heard what Cormac had done, and he threatened him saying not to lead the people astray from the true faith that he himself was teaching them; but Black Cormac would not listen to him. On Sunday morning some of the people gathered along with him to worship the

bull, and Black Cormac was the first to go into the field to set an example, and he went to prostrate himself in presence of the bull, but the beast came and put his two horns under him behind, and tossed him up in the air so high that when he came to the ground he was dead. The people remember that, still, in West Connacht, as Cormac Dubh's Sunday

Edmund: Yeah, good story, that. But it's more than just a story isn't it—let me guess its meaning. That Patrick, when he came to Ireland tried to stay friendly with the pagans and not upset them. Were they a bit like the bull, which without Christ's influence they were mad and wild. And what Patrick was bringing was the gentleness of Jesus which resulted in people putting down their weapons and becoming monks and nuns and looking after the poor. They also wrote poetry and copied the bible in a beautiful form, like the Book of Kells.

The Little Grey Friar: More than that. Notice that Patrick was able to tame the bull and make it docile. This made Black Cormack go mad himself. It was as if this new gift of Christianity got him drunk with his own importance. So instead of being mindful of who it was made his bull this nice gentle creature he became full of his own importance. Now think of the people in Waterford. Can you think of anybody who acts like Black Cormack and gets carried away by his own power?

Edmund: Some of the rich people for sure. You can see how, whether they're on horseback or in a carriage, they will trample down whoever is in their path thinking that the whole world is theirs, or laugh at you for being too slow to get out of the way.



The Little Grey Friar: What separates the rich people from the poor people? Apart from money and property, that is?

*Education provides you with the ability to steer your horse where you need to go.*

Edmund: Mm, schooling I suppose. They can read and write and work things out and read legal documents in fancy language. It's like a horse pulling your carriage. I can't think of anybody, but if you had money you might have a carriage or a very fine horse but without education you would not be going anywhere. Schooling makes you learn about all sorts of things and so you can choose what you want and where you want to go.

The Little Grey Friar: So being free like that you can also choose to throw out your religion. You can be more interested in making money and not worry about helping those in need. And as in the story you act stupid like Black Cormack and the very thing you put your faith in becomes like a wild bull and tosses you to who-knows-where.



Edmund: Now I think I can see what you're on about with these stories. What about St Brigid?

The Little grey Friar: That should be pretty obvious. Her hospitality to the poor made her famous through the ages even if her dad didn't appreciate losing his good sword. Aidan the same. Remember he gave his horse away to a poor person which didn't impress the king who gave it to him in the first place. But there's another thing about Aidan which is worth hanging onto. Remember that time when one of the monks returned after trying to preach to the pagan English and reckoned they wouldn't listen because they were stubborn and barbaric.



*St Brigid famous for her hospitality to the poor.*

Edmund: Aidan really let him have it didn't he!

The Little Grey Friar: I wouldn't put it quite like that. You can be gentle and persuasive in getting your point across as he was in voicing his disappointment at the other monk's approach: "It seems to me, brother, that you have been



*St Aidan who impressed with his humility and respect for others. Above, St Kevin and his great love for birds.*

unreasonably harsh concerning your ignorant hearers. You did not first offer them the milk of simpler teaching, as the apostle recommends, so that gradually, as they grew strong on the food of God's word, they were incapable of receiving more elaborate instruction and of carrying out the higher command of God."<sup>8</sup>

Edmund: But don't you reckon St Kevin of Glendalough was a bit mad? Throwing the woman into the lake, for a start, because he didn't want her hanging around, and then that story about him keeping his arms outstretched while he prayed because he didn't want to disturb a bird that was making a nest in his hand.

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8 Edward C. Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Indiana: Ave Maria Press Notre Dame, 1993) 50-1.

The Little Grey Friar: I can see you're getting your back teeth and wanting the world to make sense for you. Next thing you'll be taking control of it! OK, it's probably one of those examples where the writers of the saints' lives feel they have to make the characters larger than life in order to get the message across. They might do that to you one day! Throwing women into lakes is not exactly a mark of virtue. Nor is being rude to them. But there comes a time when you might have to make a stand which won't be understood by all and sundry. Ever since Eve spoke to Adam, women have had a reputation for being smooth talkers, so in listening to them or anybody else you might have to say: 'Thankyou, but no thanks, I think I know what I have to do.' On the other hand they might be the voice we need to listen to in order to follow God's will. You've got to pray about that. The other thing worth noting about Kevin and the birds is an attitude thing. What does it say about how we should relate to any of God's creatures?



*St Kevin might have found women a distraction, but Edmund was advised to pay heed to their wisdom.*

Edmund: You mean...like...we should respect birds and animals as God's creatures? We do that very well I think around here. Everything seems to have its own place and so it's easy to have that respect. Besides the birds go so well with the different seasons. They let us know whether we will have a long cold winter or a mild one.

Things like that.

But I noticed in Waterford it's a bit like dog eat dog. The cattle that you see you know are here for just one thing—to be slaughtered. The vagabonds on the streets must think that they have some power, at least, over these cattle, because some of them are cruel to them, and throw things at them, or belt them or tease them. And the animals know they are in competition for the least scrap of food that can be found. I don't like that but what can you do?



*Children taunting animals revealed a great soul hunger which called for much love and education.*

The Little Grey Friar: What can you do indeed? It's a fierce problem. Let's hope someone will come up with a solution in due course. Time is getting away on us again and it won't be long before you're off out of here learning to be a proper gentleman, a

man of quality! In the meantime I'll see what that young brother of yours, John, is up to. We've had a few sessions together already while you were away. He seems to be quite a serious young man, very interested in our way of life. He might join the Augustinians some day. But before we go let's finish on a good note shall we? You were mentioning Brigid before. There's a story about her which I really like. It seems there were two ways to run a monastery back in the old days. One guest complained that he 'found there a wind-swept draughty house, dirty bedding full of lice and fleas, and last night's bathwater still in the tub, his commons a small cup of whey and a miserable oatcake.' Brigid had a different attitude altogether to hospitality. This is what her prayer was:

*I should like a great lake of ale for the King of kings.  
I should like the household of heaven to be there drinking it for eternity...  
I should like cheerfulness to be in their drinking,  
I should like Jesus here also.<sup>9</sup>*

Edmund: What, did she want everyone drunk like those in the streets of Waterford?

The Little Grey Friar: No, no! What Brigid is saying is that she doesn't want to see anyone mean-spirited or whining. She wants people's happiness. Now what you're saying is that it's easy enough when you've got plenty—what about those who have been thrown off their little holdings



*We should not be stingy in our hospitality.*

and forced into the streets? This is the big challenge. Is it possible that these thousands of poor can be given something to—no, sorry, not given—given back, because they have as much right as anybody else to their share of sunshine? Yeah, can they be given back their heritage, land, family and religion—which ties it all together—not just prayers to wish them well.

You see, there's great change afoot. The world will never be the same as before. At last Catholics can look people in the face again. We can go to Mass without having to hide about it. We can take our Penal Crosses which have been hidden up our sleeves and put them on the mantelpiece now. But they're not like the Celtic Crosses of old with their big bold circles on them.

Edmund: Yeah, what is that circle? At hedge school we heard a little bit about

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Hughes and Ann Hamlin, *Celtic Monasticism: The Modern Traveler to the Irish Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981) 15.

it having to do with the sun and the old Celtic respect for the sun giving life to everything.

The Little Grey Friar: Yes, but I think more than that. It is the circle of life with all the seasons and everything. It is a reminder of God as Creator and all the good things we have received in creation.

Edmund: And the poor in the streets of Waterford? —

The Little Grey Friar: Don't rush me! I was coming to that! I'm afraid they are stuck with the Penal Cross. They are being crucified with Christ. For many of them their resurrection will not be as easily seen as Christ's is talked about. They need somebody to dip a sponge in refreshing drink and hold it up to their lips. They need somebody to give them a decent burial. They need somebody to take their children and break the cycle of poverty and give them a better chance than they had. Education for the poor—that's what's needed. Then they need someone to represent them in the law-courts to plead their cause when they have been deprived of what is justly theirs. And they need somebody to give them a voice in the parliament in Dublin so that they too can say what should be done so that there can be true freedom. An impossible dream you might say. But Jesus was a dreamer too and it seems that if you wish to be a follower of Jesus you must be a dreamer like him.

But we shouldn't just feel sorry for the poor. We should make sure there's less poverty. And when we give a cup of water to someone who is poor, notice the joy as their thirst is satisfied. That

should give us joy too. But as they will get thirsty again, so we need to get thirsty in seeing if we can deal with a bit more poverty.

Sometimes that will mean giving, sometimes speaking out, sometimes going

without and all the time praying—not so much words, though these are good, but being respectful of everything and everybody, knowing this is God's place and God's people. When we do this I believe we can restore the circle to the Celtic Cross instead of having the Penal Cross. The cross is still there because Christ is being crucified every time something harsh and wrong is happening but there can be hope that God's world is becoming a bit more like God wants it: a place of fruitfulness, joy—but not without struggle—and justice for all.



*Breaking the cycle of poverty.*

Edmund: Jesus, Mary and Joseph and Patrick and Brigid and all the other saints! Haven't you just now fixed the world up as simple as that! And a wee fella like meself has got to somehow get me mind around all that. No wonder the Augustinian friars sent you over here to get better. They must have thought you were sick in the head to believe all this can be done!

The Little Grey Friar: Not at all! You just watch. If I ain't mistaken you'll be in their playing your part once you get rid of your cheeky young ways. And that's what lies before you now. Go and get mad with the folly of youth—it's better that I don't know what you'll be up to. Just remember to pray for this eedjuir here who's been wasting his words on you over these many months.

Edmund: It's been great bein' with you. You make me feel there's something to live for. And I tell you I won't forget what you've said, you can be sure of that.

The Little Grey Friar: Sounds a bit like St Peter to me but it has been grand for me as well. There's a spark in you to be sure. Now off with you and good luck in your studies at Kilkenny.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. We all have our childhood fantasies of what we would like to be when we grow up. What impressions formed your idealism? Did they shape what you became?
2. There is no shortage of books and films which take us on flight of fancy. Name some of them.
3. What function do these stories play?
4. What happens when we cannot differentiate between fact and fiction?
5. To what extent do some religious belief systems become too literal in their beliefs?

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