

The late John Joe Sands

By JOHN LENNON

I GOT to know him well during our days in Banbridge (St. Patrick's High School), 1958-62. Then, when we moved to Loughbrickland, he seemed to adopt our family as an extension of his own. Since then, he has enriched us all with his humour, generosity, support and advice, and, above all, by his invaluable friendship. His door was always open to us and his hospitality as warm as it was generous. He rejoiced with us in our happy events, and lightened our burdens with his genuine concern and sorrow in our times of worry or sadness.

It was always good to be with John Joe - never dull. He was a true 'anam chara.' His blithesome spirit brightened our lives in so many many ways. My lasting happy memories of him are highlighted in legions of situations and escapades spent in his wholesome company.

Once having spend an uncomfortable night in a tent at Lough Barra we stood hunched over, silent, at breakfast in a Donegal downpour, dripping torrents as our pockets filled with rain. Eating his cold friend trout and soggy bread, and drinking cold rain-diluted tea, John considered our situation and observed with a grin "This is the life that made Fionn and the Fianna the heroes they became, and what slick tourists in plush hotels spent their gold to experience but never managed to enjoy!"

So again, after cycling round the same country for a fortnight in the ever-present rain, he hitched a tow-lift on the back of a lorry over Barnesmore gap on the very last morning. The road was being newly made up with the vilest yellow clay and gravel. Grinning from ear to ear, John clung on for mile after mile in a spray of bright yellow mud while briars reached out to scratch and tear his clothes. Arriving at the top of the descent into Ballybofey, plastered from head to toe in yellow mud and soaked to the skin, John announced with apparent satisfaction "Boys, only I was there to give that fellow a push, I don't think he'd ever have made it to the top in those conditions."

I can see him yet leaning out over the prancing prow of the boat, laughing and defying an angry squall that had the boatman quaking and all in the company silently vowing to give up fishing and pursue some wise safer pastime like croquet or knitting. Aware of dangers, he showed no sign of fear.

John Joe enjoyed life and his happiness was in sharing his joy in the most mischievous ways. Only he would consider publicly stealing a bicycle, long an-

anticipated, and just newly-arrived that Christmas morning. Sure of being caught - the more to enjoy a situation that would be a memory to be treasured - as its young owner gave him a character reference which by comparison would have made Jack the Ripper seem like an archangel. Or else, semi surreptitiously pocketing some small item from our room in the sure knowledge that he would be set upon by two highly-alert, beady-eyed young boys and thoroughly searched. All the time he protested his indignation and innocence and eventually his inability to change his ways!

His talent for creating such memories was only equalled by his generosity and hospitality which totally confused the same pair of perplexed, self-appointed watchmen who sprang to the alert as soon as he hove into sight - much to his amusement and silent glee.

His humour was pithy, natural and often with a flavour of the irreverent or the uncharitable - though John Joe had not a iota of either in his make-up nor did he tolerate either in others.

On an Ascension Thursday week-end fishing trip to Lough Derravaragh, we went to Mass in the beautifully-restored Abbey, at Multyfarnham. The sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows depicting the Children of Lir. At Communion, somehow, the alb of the aged priest snagged on John's foot almost causing the poor man to fall. Afterwards, as we walked around perusing the ancient headstones in the churchyard, I commented that John had almost been responsible for the erection of another. He just looked at me severely and said, "He almost deserved it, after chanting that responsorial psalm. Do you now know that that psalm was chanted by the Cromwellian soldiers as they marched into Drogheda?"

*The Lord goes up with shouts of joy
The Lord goes up with trumet blast"*

That particular response never got John's whole-hearted enthusiasm, and I must say it fills me with unease, ever since.

Deeply interested in all things Irish, John immersed himself in our history and revered the glories of the past-down to his fishing apparel and gear. An ancient red box held a contemporaneous collection of flies and accoutrements. These were supplemented by a motley array of flies of ancient pedigree, stuck in a red polo necked pullover also a venerable vintage.

These were liberated at intervals by means of teeth, nails and often a lighted cigarette: then offered to me to attach to the cast I invariably had to tie for him. He claimed that he was unable to join tapered casts to please himself - or never would trust himself to do so! Yet in spite of the antiquity of those flies and the absurdity of his choices of pattern, much to his delight, he always managed to acquit himself as well - or as badly - as I did with, what to me, was my much superior tackle.

Courageous in adversity, calm in crisis, ever aware of his fellow human-being, John will be widely and greatly missed. He bore his final illness with typical patience and dignity, and with complete resignation to the will of the Great Fisherman. I am quite sure he has been gently gathered from His net, and just as surely, judged a 'Keeper.'

Ar dheis de go rabh a anam uasal!

JOHN LENNON.



END OF AN ERA

Constables R. Cherry, L. Busby, A. T. Campbell and Sergeant D. K. Rodgers watch workmen as they take down the R.U.C. sign at Poyntzpass Police Station when it closed in April 1967.