

DID YOU GET ANY SLAPS TODAY?

BY BRIDHE HERON



The Old School House

Well, it all began one morning in the autumn of 1937 when I was just three years old. I was so excited for I knew that that was the day I was to start school. I was dressed and ready in good time and waited breathlessly for the knock on the door that would tell me that Babs had come for me. Babs Canavan, a lovely young girl of eleven or twelve whom I knew well, was to take me to school and in good time she duly arrived. As the eldest of my family it was not just a big day for me but for my mother too and so there were some hurried hugs and kisses and no doubt, warnings, “to be a good girl, behave and do what the teacher tells you,” before we set off. Babs took me by the hand and we made our way down to Chapel Street past all the shops and old houses so familiar to me. Then it was up past the Chapel to the ancient school house at the foot of Chapel Hill.

I felt proud of myself and quite grown up for I had become a pupil at Poyntzpass No. 1 Public Elementary School. The school house, in reality extremely small, seemed very big to me and there were so many big and noisy children racing about and playing rough games that I began to feel very small again. We were early and school hadn’t started yet but Babs took me in to meet my

teacher, Miss Cassidy. Miss Cassidy who was sitting at her table in the classroom in front of the fire, wasn’t surprised to see me for my mother had talked to her and arranged for me to start.

Miss Mary Anne Cassidy was a large woman, or so I thought at that time. She had reddish light brown hair and wore glasses. It was said that she came from Hamiltonsbawn, which as far as I knew might just as well have been Timbuktu! She welcomed me warmly and I liked her right away.

I don’t remember a great deal about my first day other than that I sat on a form with other infants and perhaps scribbled on a slate but I’m sure I was generally in awe of everything with all the activity that was going on around me.

The infants’ room was a large square room with a high ceiling. It had a big open fire at one end with a high mantelpiece over it and on this mantelpiece was a clock. As a gesture to Health and Safety there was a permanent wire fire-guard on the outside of the hearth. Big boys from the master’s room would come in regularly, climb over this guard and put coal on the fire.



Babs Canavan

The room had four long windows with frosted glass so we couldn't see what was happening on the road outside. The classroom door led directly onto the Chapel Hill roadway because there was no footpath.

Five or six long heavy wooden desks dominated this room graduating in height from the front to the back. These ancient desks with cast iron legs had been in the school for many years and were, by my time, well worn. A long bench on which the pupils sat was an integral part of the desk design. There was a hole in the desk top into which an inkwell would fit, although we only used pencils at that stage and as a result, this inkwell hole was often full of pencil sharpenings. There was a groove to put your pencils in. Underneath the work surface was a shelf to store books or other possessions. Desks at the front of the room had a slit into which the senior infants could place their slates when not in use. Each desk would accommodate six or seven pupils.

Apart from the desks and the teacher's table and chair, the room was furnished with a free standing blackboard, a large cupboard and an ancient harmonium. As Miss Cassidy's table and chair were placed more or less directly in front of the fire very little, if any, heat escaped to the rest of the room.

Corporal punishment was the order of the day at the time but I always managed to avoid the cane. However, almost every day on my way home Billy McGivern or someone would surely ask me, "Did you get any slaps today?"

I found Miss Cassidy to be very kind, but oh, she could be very cross at times too. She told us all the traditional fairy tales and nursery rhymes and other little poems. I particularly remember that when she told us a fairy tale such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' or 'The Three Little Pigs', she would include local people as characters and name



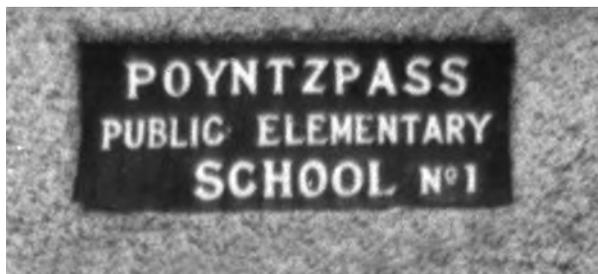
Miss Mary Anne Cassidy

**J.J. McGee,
Headmaster**

familiar places. For example, when telling us the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' she would say perhaps, 'Now as the first little pig was going up the Chapel Hill, he met John McComb coming from Acton with a load of straw....' or "the second little pig met Peter Gribben on the Back Lane with a load of sticks" and so on. This made the stories seem very real to us and I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd met Red Riding Hood on my way home from school!

It is the harmonium that I remember most of all. Like everything else in the school the harmonium had seen better days. I think that the school had inherited it when it was deemed unfit for further use in the chapel. It had two foot-pedals which when pressed alternately, provided enough wind for Miss Cassidy to provide a rather asthmatic accompaniment to our singing lessons. The harmonium and the open fire are what I recall most vividly and, in my memory, I associate them with the song, "The Spinning Wheel". When we sang this song I am sure I could hear "the young maiden singing" and see her, in my mind's eye, climbing out the window onto the back lane to meet her boy friend! The harmonium somehow became the spinning wheel and I pictured granny snoozing by the open fire turning the bellows occasionally.

On special occasions Miss Cassidy made cocoa in a well blackened saucepan on the open fire and the milk invariably boiled over and burned. The cocoa was accompanied by Paris buns, purchased in Miss Annie Callaghan's shop for the princely sum of one old penny. To this day the smell of boiled milk takes me back to that time.



Nameplate above school entrance

Of all the lessons my favourite was learning rhymes and poetry. Poetry was a must in those days and had to be learned by heart. I loved poems which painted a picture of something I could visualise and one we learned in those early years was “*In Mercer Street*” by Seamus O’Sullivan. It begins

“A piper in the street today

Set up and tuned and started to play

And away, away, away on the tide of his music we started.....”

After progressing through the baby, junior and senior infants, and first class, by the age of nine or ten we graduated to the master’s room. Although I didn’t realise it at the time, conditions in Poyntzpass No 1 Public Elementary school were pretty grim. The building was very old. The master’s room was the original school building. It had been built in 1813 and was practically unchanged from that time. In 1905 the infants’ room had been added. Both classrooms had wooden floors. In the master’s room where countless boots had worn away the floor boards for over a hundred years, only the knots standing up high above the surrounding wood, gave an indication of the floor boards’ original thickness. There was no school caretaker. Each morning before lessons began the master, aided by senior pupils, would have to clean out, set and light the fires in the two classrooms and every day, after lessons were over, the older pupils, kept in late for that purpose, would have to brush the floor. Before they swept the floor they sprinkled the boards with water in a vain attempt to keep the dust down. There was no electricity or water supply. Water for the teachers’ tea came from a pump in Carson’s field nearby. The sanitary arrangements were virtually non-existent - a short walk down the back lane that ran behind the school brought one to the unspeakable lavatories for girls and boys which were back to back. These were primitive in the extreme. There was no running water and certainly no facilities for handwashing. That subject is best left there!

If a window happened to be broken, and that seemed to happen regularly, either by accident or vandalism, the master fixed it himself with a pane of glass from Henry Clarke’s and what’s more he paid for it too.

The master’s room was rectangular, long and narrow, with three small square paned windows facing the road and a larger window facing south overlooking the graveyard. Most of the light came from here for there was no electricity. A tall desk stood in the top corner of the classroom where the roll book and school register were kept, and other important things I suppose, because I never got to see inside it. Behind this tall desk was another cupboard.

A wall-mounted blackboard hung directly above the stove with a table and backless chair in front of it. When a pupil was asked to do a sum on the board he or she had to stand on this chair to reach the board. On the table were assorted piles of copy books as well as chalk, chalky rags for cleaning the blackboard, the school hand bell and the frequently used cane. The aforementioned black stove on the north side heated this room. Three steps led up to the infants’ room from this side. Long desks similar to those in the infants’ room and benches along the east wall where the narrow windows were, furnished the room. The desks did have inkwells because by now we were writing with pen and ink. Ink stains abounded on fingers and desks. Charts covered the west wall, illustrating native animals, trees and insects and there were several wonderful big maps of the World, Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales showing the counties, cities, towns, lakes and rivers and what they were famous for – the potteries, mining, shipbuilding, lace, shoemaking etc. I have never forgotten those maps and would love to see them again. Another memory is of learning the cardinal points starting with local references. “*To the north the Chapel Hill, to the south the graveyard, to the east McComb’s field, to the west Calvert’s field.*”

Mr McGee, the headmaster, was from Newtownhamilton. I remember him as a tall man with a tonsure of black hair round his bald head which led to his unflattering nickname, Baldy McGee. He was very stern and although I did not have a problem with him, many



Billy McGivern with Peg and Teresa Magill



Back Row: (left to right) *Matt Quinn Jim O'Loughlin Sean Burne Erill Carson Joe Ryan Phil Watters Eiver McSherry Pat Canavan J.J. McGee (Principal)*

Second Row: *Miss O'Donnell (Substitute) Phil Daly Marie Trainor Marie Garvey Rose Garvey Bridhe Murphy (The present author) Teresa Ryan Maria McKee Mary Murphy Kathleen Magennis Mary Magill John Lennon Tommy Lennon Raymond McSherry*

Third Row: (Standing) *Seamus Convery Sean Trainor (Sitting) Angela Trainor Sodilva McVeigh Bridie McKee Brigid McDonnell Mary-Rose Burns Joan Daly Greta McSherry Mary Gethins Betty Gethins Margaret Morrow*

Front Row: *Dermot Lennon Fergal Murphy Colman Murphy Liam Magennis Ita McDonnell Nora Gethins Ann McVeigh Mary-Alice Burns Aidan Lennon Niall Murphy Eiver Magennis Finbarr Convery Frank Magill*

others did. He appeared to believe the old adage, “*Spare the rod and spoil the child*”, so the cane was used liberally. He had a fine singing voice and we had regular singing lessons. He taught us many of the favourite folk songs such as “*Loch Lomond*” and “*The Keel Row*”.

The school had no playground. We played on the road. The Chapel Hill was a quiet place in the early days and the only traffic was the odd horse and cart. There were few cars – one could count and name the car owners locally then on one hand. Sometimes herds of cattle would be moving to different pastures or coming or going from milking.

The road was our playground and very often we began our day with exercise to warm us up. Apart from those exercises we skipped, played hopscotch and possibly a form of rounders. Skipping was accompanied by rhymes which had been handed down over the generations. The boys often played a rough game of football, always with a tennis ball or ball of similar size. The ball would regularly go into McComb’s field and this led to problems sometimes, since in retrieving the ball, holes were broken through the hedge.

Despite his reputation for sternness, Mr McGee was kindly too. He would take pupils to his home in Warrenpoint for a little seaside break and later to play

with his daughter Marie – I was never a guest of his. Miss Cassidy lived in Corry Square in Newry and later moved to Kilmorey Street. She also took some of her pupils for an overnight stay – I was one of her guests a few times – she made a nice meal for us and maybe took us to the ‘pictures’.

Each day we were given homework which was specific to that day every week – arithmetic, spelling, catechism and poetry had to be memorised as well as tables; the big homework was left for Friday, the composition – an essay – I invariably left mine to Sunday night in spite of my mother’s exhortations. It would be a rushed affair.

As well as catechism, arithmetic, geography, english and music, on the curriculum were P.E. and Nature Study. We were brought out of the classroom for these last two subjects. There was neither equipment nor facilities for P.E. for we hadn’t even a playground. Nature Studies for us was a ramble up to the “wee wood” which was a short distance from the school going toward Acton. I remember how noisy it could be, not from us but from the crows overhead.

Marbles was a popular game at this time and was played by the boys particularly as they made their way home from school, often ending in fisticuffs and rows – the marbles were very precious to their owners. I can only

remember the black and white marbles, and the red ones which they called “bloods”. They were much sought after. I can’t remember but there was probably a season for this activity.

During the war the Chapel Hill became quite hazardous as traffic increased because of army vehicles going to and from the army base on the Acton Road. The British tanks were scary enough but nothing compared to the American ones. I still remember the rumble of the American tanks and the school building vibrating as they trundled by. Among my memories of this time was the Christmas party which the American troops gave for the school children when they were encamped on the Chapel Hill. A memorable evening also was going to Acton to be fitted with a gas mask and doing the fire drill.

The senior pupils in Mr McGee’s room read extracts from some of the Shakespeare plays and while I left early to go to school in Newry, later my brothers were familiar with “*Julius Caesar*” and “*The Merchant of Venice*” and can still quote from those plays. One bit of Shakespeare I did learn in Poyntzpass was the poem, “*Blow, blow thou winter wind*”.

Few visitors came to the school but among my vague memories are of the dentist coming once in a while and I remember with horror the sound of the drill which was operated by a foot pedal. The school nurse and doctor visited the school annually and we had a general health check. Another annual visit was the religious inspector – he stood at the top of the room and rattled out questions to various pupils. Woe betide you, afterwards, if you had not answered correctly!

In those days many pupils didn’t leave the primary school until they were fourteen and the “big” boys and girls went to woodwork and cookery classes respectively



The school clock in the Headmaster’s room

in the Technical school on Tuesday afternoons. The building was a wooden structure and consisted of two classrooms, one for woodwork and the other for cookery. It was situated in Meeting Street where Mrs Tommy McComb’s bungalow is today. I never got to go to those classes – the girls had to wear white aprons and caps. As far as I can remember the boys went down the back lane and would have to cross the river at Gribben’s. I never heard of anyone falling in.

I’ve come to the end of my journey. I hope it has brought back pleasant memories of your own schooldays.

(Miss Cassidy later married a Mr Hendron, a widower, and acquired not only a husband but two stepsons. These boys were to become well known in Northern Ireland politics – Jim Hendron was a founder member of the Alliance Party and Joe in the S.D.L.P. Joe became an M.P. and also served in Stormont as Minister of Health for a time.)



‘Camel-Back Bridge’ Newry Canal, Poyntzpass