

An Feadog – The Whistle

Written by Eamonn O'Loughlin - Last Updated Thursday, 30 July 2009 12:21



Over fifty years later, The Whistle has left an indelible mark on my soul and my persona. Anyone who knows me will tell you Lockie is rarely late for an appointment, and if he is, there is usually a very good reason.

I had just started Infants (Babies) Class across the town at the Convent when I first encountered the regimen of DF's whistle. DF was my father, Donogh Francis O'Loughlin and The Whistle well, more about DF and The Whistle later.

At the tender age of four, my first port of call in our classic education system was to the Sisters of Mercy and the angelic yet demonic face and personality of Sister Terezita (aka Terrorzita). It didn't take her long to 'straighten the cap' on the lad from Church Street.

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It was two years before I made it across town to the Christian Brothers, a school opened by Brother Edmund Ignatius Rice himself in 1824 at the request of Rev. Peter O'Loghlin. This was the same school where John Philip Holland, the inventor of the modern submarine was educated. The refrain of the day was: "Eggs and rashers for the Monastery Dashers ... Hay and Oats for the Convent Goats".

The convent was located just behind the Catholic Church, newly consecrated by the Bishop of Galway himself, Dr. Michael Browne, a man whose idiosyncrasies would be better described in a Dan Brown novel. We lived at the other end of town (you could run it in ten minutes - and we often did), where that other Church was, hence, it was called Church Street. It never bothered anyone, nor should it have, that it was the street where the Protestant Church was located. St. Andrew's was a beautiful Church that nowadays is a House of Music (Teach Ceoil) that was donated by Dean Talbot to the local Comhaltas Branch. It was however rumoured that one night my Uncle, Rory O'Connor (aka The King of Doolin) allowed the donkey he had sold to the famous Matchmaker, Willie Daly, to graze on the Protestant Church grounds. The donkey died the next day and it was said the reason was that the donkey had eaten Protestant grass. Of course everybody, except Willie, knew that the donkey was on his last legs, before he ever went through the gates of St. Andrews. Uncle Rory reluctantly gave Willie his five pounds back and they drank to Neidin the donkey at Murty McMahon's wondering had Neidin 'taken the soup' and crossed over to the other side before joining those Ghost Riders in the Sky.

I digress, oh yes, The Whistle. D.F. was a man that loved order above all else. He had been in the army, had won major awards as a marksman and had visions of serving side by side with General Sean McEoin (The Blacksmith of Ballinalee). He actually never forgave my Grandfather for willing him the family business, a General Draper & Outfitters shop in Ennistymon, County Clare. But being a man that followed orders he took on the family business and in addition always involved himself in politics as a true blue Fine Gaeler to the very end.

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The Whistle of my dreams (and nightmares) came from America after the crash of 1929. It belonged to a Police Captain in Chicago and on it was stamped Municipal Police U.S.A. It was a souvenir from the streets of America given to my father by Padhraic Scales from Doolin who had just returned with his wife Lizzy. Padhraic had become an entrepreneur in America after the Volstead Act (Prohibition) came into effect in 1919 as a Potcheen maker which he bootlegged to the Speakeasies through his police connections.

The Draper from Church Street took a great shining to the sturdy whistle, still on the same string that had hung around the neck of the Irish American Police Captain who was keeping law and order on the streets of Chicago and trying to stay out of the way of the bullets of Al Capone and his boys from Cicero.

At precisely 5:45 p.m. each evening DF would come out the front door of his shop and blow the whistle with wild abandon beckoning his progeny home for dinner. At the sound of every blow, our hearts would thump even faster to ensure we would not be AWOL at the stoke of six when the Angelus would have to be said in front of the black and white Pye TV set with the bells ringing over the image of the St. Brigid's Cross.

It didn't matter if we were fishing down the river, playing Cowboys and Indians down the woods or in later days in the middle of a serious poker game - once the whistle blew we were on

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overdrive heading for Church Street. One evening at the age of eight, I remember I was in such a hurry, that I left one of my pals, who was playing an Indian, tied to a tree. He managed to pry himself loose several hours later and of course told his mother I had left him tied to a tree to die. After she reported this incident of unprecedented cruelty to DF, I was confined to barracks for a week and did KP duty on a few bags of spuds. The bloody Whistle had ruined my life again.

It was hard enough growing up in this market town without everyone knowing what time you and your siblings were expected home and the repercussions that would ensue if you weren't. There was a lot of teasing as it seemed that my father was the only one in town with a whistle. It was only years later that I realised that the rest of the town didn't need a whistle - ours was actually The Town Whistle as everyone could set their clocks by it. My father was never late and he rarely left town. On a recent visit home, a fellow from Main Street who was about my own age, told me that all his brothers and sisters always headed for home when they heard my father blowing the whistle. So, to a certain extent, the Draper from Church Street, had his own army although he didn't know it. Rank and file, the children of the town followed the Draper's whistle home like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Today, The Whistle holds pride of place in our home sitting in the silver trophy that DF won in the Semi Final of the South of Ireland Golf Championship when he was beaten by his friend and colleague, the famous Paddy Leyden in 1957. Also sitting inside the same trophy is a metal number six (6). This was the number on my bedroom door and I took that, along with the Whistle and the trophy when DF died in 1998.

Just two years ago on a visit to Lahinch Golf Club I visited the Pro Shop and Robert McCavery said, "Eamonn, welcome home. You won't believe what I have for you". With that, Robert produced three Henry Cotton irons with my Dad's initials indented on them. About 30 years ago my Dad had left them with Robert to be re-gripped and they sat in Robert's back shop until Robert rediscovered them the day before I visited. Coincidence or what? These are some of my prized possessions.

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D.F. was a tough man, but a fair, honest and generous man. He would have made a great general, alongside MacEoin and his hero and mine, General Michael Collins.

Ni fheicimid a leithead aris.