

Along the Canal

by Mel T MacGiobúin

My grandfather, ‘grandpa’, knew people. He seemed to me to know everyone. We were in Dublin for a few days before we went back to New York for the last time in September 1972. Grandpa brought us to the All-Ireland Hurling Final.

My father worked with Pan Am airlines and we got discounted standby flights. We were flying back to New York from Dublin instead of Shannon that September. My mother loved coming back ‘home’ to Ireland, she didn’t seem to mind travelling across the Atlantic with the three of us, myself and my two younger sisters. My father didn’t like flying.

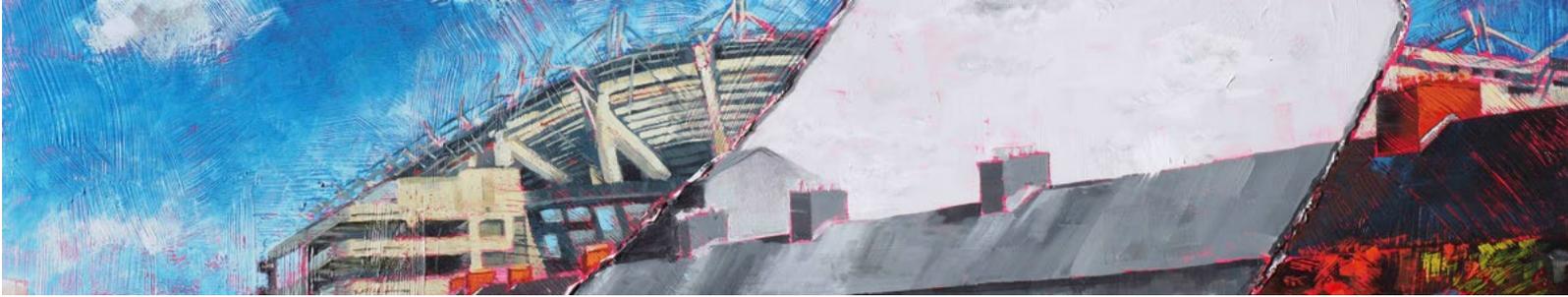
We were in Croke Park, grandpa, mam and me among the excited throngs of people, groups of county fans with their colours - black-and-amber and red-and-white. All Ireland Sunday - the first Sunday in September 1972. The hurling final with Cork against Kilkenny in the minors and the seniors. Old sparring enemies, the top teams pitched against each other for the Liam McCarthy cup. The trophy would go to the fleetest, deftest, strongest and most upright team after a breathless whirlwind battle of the hurley and the sliothar.

The excitement was electric and the raucous banter was good-natured. The air was full of loud opinions, half-growling laughter as groups weaved and cut through each other. The stadium was filled with a gathering of tens of thousands. The place was jammed with crepe-paper rosettes and ill-fitting white card hats with more crepe-paper covering thick wiry wigs of hair over ruddy angular faces. They were just off-the-fields, their bushy sideburns containing the full babbling chorus of accents from every corner of the land.

We were ushered along, away from the surging tide, heading with purpose. Grandpa knew where to go, effortlessly past barriers, through doors, around corners, with short words and smiles and reassuring glances to my mother and I, through a sea of chaos, leading in his calm raft beside the foaming rapids.

Somehow we emerged from under a stand into an opening with massing crowds murmuring across the terraces and stands out in front of us across the wide pitch and up behind us, the Cusack Stand. My mother asks whether I’ll be alright, and Grandpa’s knowing strong jaw nods that all will be fine. She goes to the stand.

My grandpa is well attired as always, with a raincoat opened, a soft trilby hat in hand. His bald head is tight-skinned and gleaming, he is supremely confident and perfectly pleasing to all about him. A few words to a man or two in their ‘MAOR’-marked bibs, he knows them all



and they understand him perfectly. He briskly heads along by the sidelines to the left by the terrace. The swelling crowd is heaving, voices becoming raised. The pre-game fever is rising, contagious and spreading through the arena.

He has a word with another steward by the opening at the foot of the Canal End. We head up to the middle of the terrace near the goal, to the left side of the posts. There is still room on the terrace. The Minor teams are out on the vast pitch, warming up, surrounded by a growing crowd, colours of the two rivals amassing into blocks.

Grandpa said something encouraging to me, and I understood that I should stay at that spot. He went off down to the sideline near the stewards back towards the Cusack.

I was unperturbed and absorbed in the atmosphere. I felt safe in my pale canary yellow short jacket, making me invincible and instantly visible, so I could not get lost and nothing could go wrong. I felt safe alone in the crowd.

I was born in Cork and the county had been my main experience of Ireland in the 1960s, as we had travelled by ship or plane yearly from Boston, from New York to and from Ireland.

We would spend the summer from late June to early September down in Crosshaven outside Cork city. This was where ‘granda and nanny’, my mother’s parents lived. That’s where I was introduced to hurling, football, Croke Park, Sunday games, Cork, Kilkenny, Galway, Tipp, Wexford, Kerry, Offaly, Donegal and all the big teams. It was all the talk, the sports pages and listening to the games. My grandfather, my mother’s father, ‘granda’ was a Kerry man from Cahersiveen. Football was his passion; there was only Kerry, Mick O’Connell and Mick O’Dwyer, giants like himself.

Transcribed from an interview that 10 year old Mel (budding journalist) made with his grandfather, ‘granda’, recorded on a Panasonic audio cassette tape recorder:

“...and what about the best game of them all? The old GAA,” granda says in a thick soft rolling Kerry accent.

“Gae-lick?” Mel responds in a strong New York twang.

“Gaelic football,” says granda.

“Eh, I’ll play that!” says Mel, enthusiastically.

“You see the grand teams we have down in Kerry, even at the present day. We have some of the best men that were ever in Kerry,” says granda.

“Such as Mick O’Connell,” says granda.

“O’Connell?” says Mel

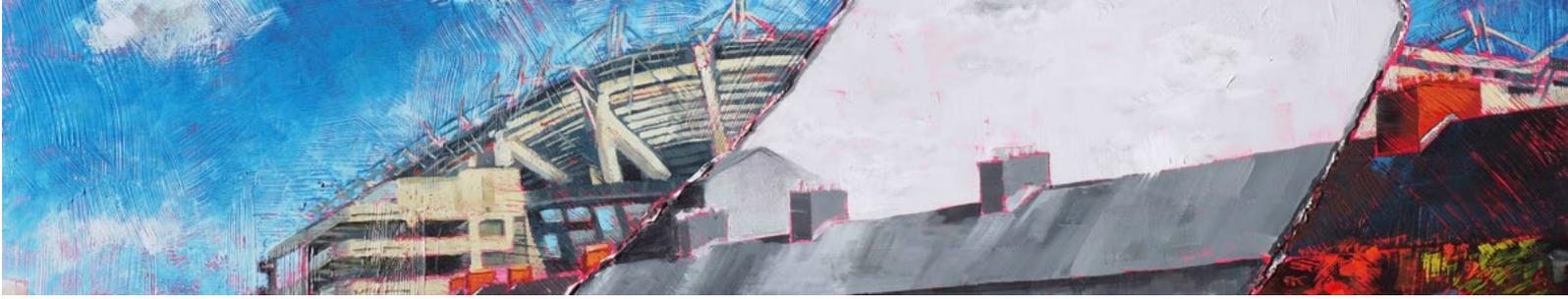
“Mick O’Dwyer,” says granda.

“Oh yeah, I heard of him,” says Mel

“The Lynchs, the Sullivans,” says granda.

“The Lynchs.... Sullivans... yeah.... How about Cork?” asks Mel.

“Cork have a good hurling team,” says granda...



Nanny, my grandmother was Cork - hurling, football and she loved all sport. She had been to Dublin once, on her honeymoon, to a hotel in Gardiner Row, near Croke Park, in 1928.

There was the wireless, a big old Bush radio, or the television was turned on before six if there was a big match to see. Croke Park was the rushing clip of Micheál Ó'Hehir's voice and a cheering crowd responding to his on the static waves of the radio or the snowy black and white screen. Our world rotated around the championships and those summer games.

The crowd grows silent, sings the anthem to its blazing crescendo; the whistle blows; the enormous crowd roars. The timber-smack of the ash on the sliothar. It is a dizzying blur of running men as I strain to see through the swaying bodies and heads. The voices behind shout out for Kilkenny.

There is one staccato female voice cheering, above all "*Come on, Matty - Matty from Mullinvat!*" Her call is repeated throughout the whole of both games.

I can hear it still, after nearly fifty years and it had the edge to drive 'Matty' on and on. It was sustained by the woman throughout the minor game. She must have brought Kilkenny Minors luck as they won. The Cork lads left defeated and breathless on the roughed-up field in the end, having given their all. 'The Cats Are Back!' was the high-pitched chorus.

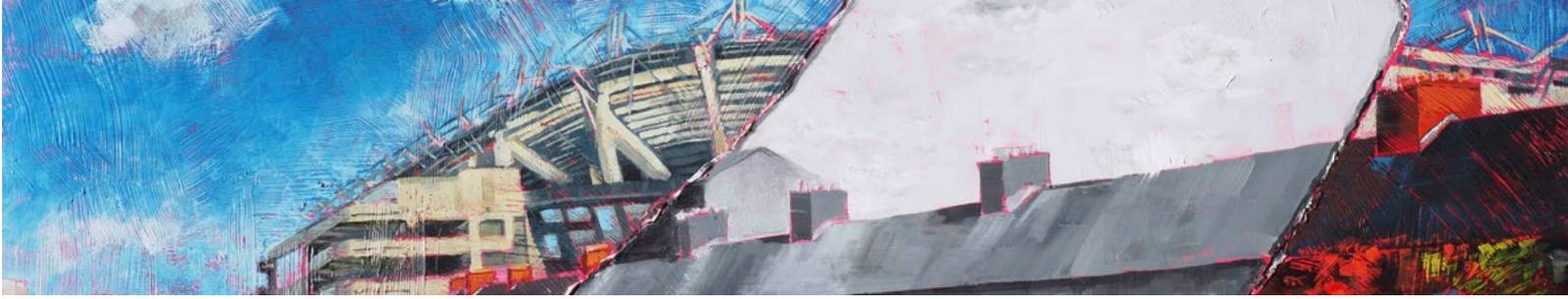
The exhaling crowd shuffles and moves about. All over the terraces and stands there is a murmuring, smoke billowing, the ruddy faces uplifted and showing relief, the coloured glossy programmes thumbed, passed, figures pointed at 'Did you see him, did you see that reach?'

It was like being at the circus, in the middle of it - colours and people's shouts, laughter swirling about close by on the Canal terrace and all over the vast heaving body swarming, the sound rising, blended noise of game chatter, shuffling movements, cascading loose change from hand to pocket and I'm still transposed from tar-scented New York streets to the warm heroic champions' day of celebration.

The senior final, it was one of those epic hurling matches of titans. In the arena, with cut, thrust, flight long high outfield and unstoppable bursting goals. A crowd brought beyond fever pitch in full-throated frenzy to ever-climbing peaks.

"*Go on Matty, Matty from Mullinvat,*" she kept roaring above the soaring chorus. Was 'Matty' a primordial spirit of Kilkenny hurling, driving them on to win and turn the tables from no chance? The Rebel county had lost.

The Kilkenny fans swarmed the pitch from all sides, to be beside their sweaty heroes. This was raw energy I'd never seen the likes of, although I was not overly cocooned as a child. I had played hours of ball in the field behind the boatyard in 'Crosser' with the boys down



from the city many times, where us kids manically chased around after the orange plastic ball until we were all shirtless, exhausted and called in for tea.

But this stadium was full of tens of thousands of grown men and women going wild with joy at the victory and the contest. Flocking around and shrieking the highest praise on their team, their friends and neighbours. The divine infused in the ordinary.

And like the intensity of the kids' game, the excitement was over, deflated. It was packed away and we went off, not to celebrate with the victors. I was retrieved from the stand and taken out of the strange field of play, hidden behind the dull shabby old broken brick buildings that kept the streets narrow and mostly in shade from the sun, and driven away. Centuries away from the New York skyscrapers that I was soon to fly to ,but only for one more last short time. But oh having smelt and tasted that magic!

I look back at the still image from the telly, a fuzzy tight cluster of indistinct shapes and colours that I am immersed in. Is this the same place? It was an unknown place to my ten-year-old self. That small standing terrace of block steps rising up to the low back wall, crammed with thousands of ecstatic supporters.

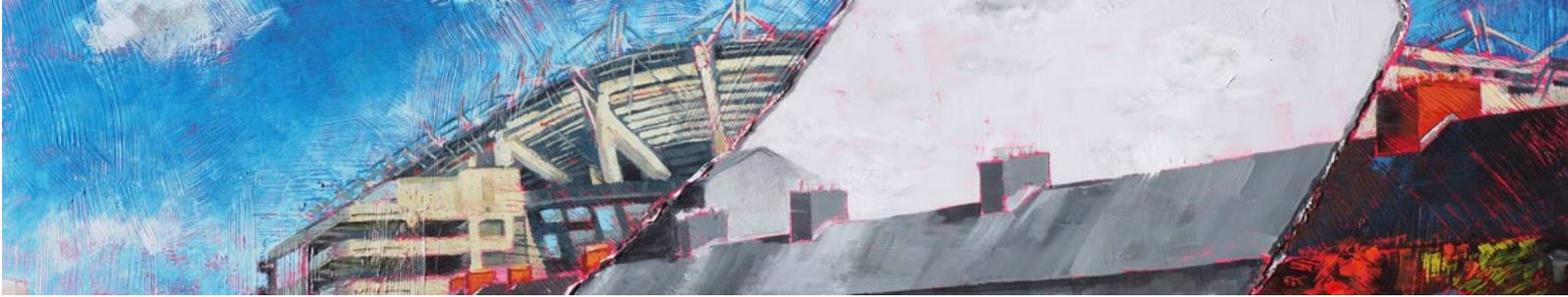
The place where once when there were trees and young boys fell from branches, clipped like birds, crashing bloodied and shot dead.

I stare at the stilled frame and I see the tall houses behind the terrace, hunched together across the canal from the far distant past. I never saw those buildings in 1972.

But now I walk by them every morning, as I go under the towering Davin Stand, along the banks of Royal Canal by the changing seasons of the dark and the light of the rising morning.

What did he see? What did my grandpa see, placing me in the Canal end? Did he remember? Did he even know? Of course he did, he knew everyone and everything. I knew this because his children revered him, their section commander. He'd kept all five of them together after their mother, his love, died with the sixth child after the birth in 1936.

They said, the friends, the wise, the leaders, that he shouldn't raise them, it was not the way - the children would have to go to different families. He resisted their 'guidance'. He found a way to keep his children together. He would bring in some help, the girls came from Connemara. Then he brought his mother-in-law, Rose who was in her eighties, to live with them. Rose needed looking after too, but it made it acceptable. The older boys later went to boarding school through an old friend who joined the priesthood after the 'fight', and the priest arranged for the older boys to go to the boarding school. There was always a way, a



contact, a means to get around the challenge and the need to adapt the plan. That was the duty of the section commander. Four of the five of them went on to college.

Yes, of course he knew. He knew about the canal end and the dead boys, the slaughter and the panic. He knew of cost and sacrifice. He was a surviving 'die-hard'.

He only ever said to his sons, that they were told not to go to Croke Park that afternoon in November. None in his Company of the Dublin Brigade went to the game on Bloody Sunday. The following morning he travelled to Liverpool with a cousin, to go across to England and source another arms shipment for the men in the West.

Yes, of course he knew. He also saw and felt the cost amongst his comrades. He saw the physical and mental suffering and the families cruelly left in poverty, as men's lives were broken, shortened and exiled over the coming decades. He spent a lot of time working to get support, to get people housed and to find jobs for those in need. He worked with others to get some men back to finish their medical studies without barriers or consequences after the bitter fight.

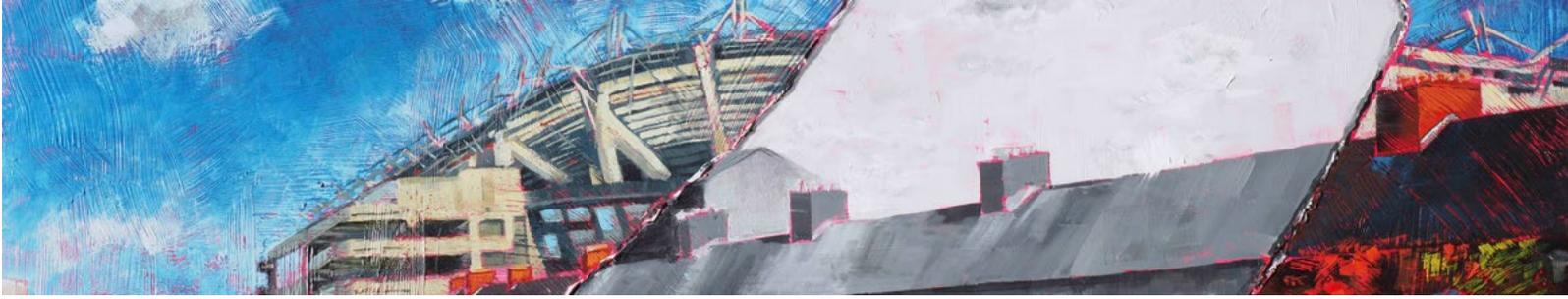
Yes, of course he knew. He knew about the canal end and the dead boys.

Those houses there in that still frame, that house with its hidden secrets and open secrets to all those from the surrounding streets, where the wounded men were taken after their shattering morning 'visits'. The house where they were treated, swabbed clean, strapped and wrapped. Hidden away later in the day in 'the Richmond cottages' were I now live, when the gunfire rattled in Croke Park, echoing through the streets.

And one of those caregivers that day, a medical student, who was forty years later, our family doctor in his Long Island GP surgery. That surgery, where recently my mother recalled from long ago, that there had been an old photograph of men - the doctor, my grandpa and others, all friends and comrades-in-arms from those grisly days of '*fire and thunder*'. She was having a good day that day, when we chatted. The veils lifted for a short while that Thursday and she revealed a previously unrecounted memory.

My Brazilian neighbour passes me on the street as I go off on my early walk in the dark winter morning, the sky speckled with late stars. A swarthy high-viz clad East European builder stomps by the narrow footpath, heading for his work lift. Two African girls jog along in their steady paced strut.

A young Asian man shuffles swiftly by, probably a bit later than usual, fully masked, ignoring the twenty or so granite setts with the coal hole plates, some still with their original forged castings, some with simpler metal discs and some filled-in concrete circles. Now, more than ever, like my New York of the 1960s, these gritty streets with red-bricked buildings are full of people from different cultures, stories and songs, earning a crust.



Along the vanishing Georgian boundary, bruised by the ever-changing population of this city - from the grand single-family households; the over-crowded tenements of Irish-speakers from famished soils; those musty decrepit bedsits of transient labourers; Air B'n'B nests; co-living modular units.

The pulsing waves of migrants from south and east seeking gold paved streets, as so many of my relatives had done before, leaving their burnt-out war-torn homelands and going far away.

Croke Park Stadium, the daunting modern monolith, standing above us all on our journey.