

My First Day At School. (St. Patrick's 1949)

My first day at St. Patrick's School, is etched on my memory as brightly as the moon on a clear frosty evening. My Mam takes me to the school door, as far as parents were allowed to go in those days, I'm not at all nervous, on the contrary, I'm looking forward to my life as a schoolboy. My Mam had been telling me for several months that I'm a big lad now, and would really enjoy it, new friends learning to read etc., and I've heard her say to my Aunties "he's ready for school", he of course being me.

Mam gone, a very large statue of St. Patrick gazes down on me, with what I convince myself is a disapproving look, not the hint of a smile. I in my childlike way try to reason why if our patron saint is in heaven he looks so glum, on the other side of the large hall, is another statue of The Sacred Heart of Jesus, the expression on his face is only marginally more friendly, maybe he's annoyed with St. Patrick for not showing more joy at being in paradise. I soon avert my eyes from the residents of heaven, and busy myself with my new class mates, some of whom I know from the adjoining streets, but the vast majority are completely new faces. Several of the new faces are much taller than me, and like the statues don't seem overjoyed at my presence. I start to wonder if this school thing is such a good idea, and I sure my Mam will be lonely, and missing me terribly. Tears are only held back by the fear that, if I allow them to flow, I will be called a softie, or worse still a cissy.

The atmosphere of the hall changes noticeably on the arrival of the Head Teacher, Miss Egan, whom I know by sight, from seeing her at Mass on Sundays, she is welcoming and seems very very pleased with her new charges. Miss Egan tells us that we are fortunate to be coming to the best school in Wigan, and we ought always to remember that, both in and outside school. Miss Egan then introduces us to our class teacher, Miss Dickinson, who is at least 7 foot tall, she has very friendly countenance, and I think looks a lot like my Mam.

Everyone is delighted with her pleasant manner, none more than me as I'm sure she'll be particularly nice to me, because of her striking resemblance to my Mam. As we make our way to the babies' class, the first class was always referred to thus. As we make our way we pass the afore mentioned statue of St. Patrick, I give a sideways glance at the saint, he seems to have the hint of a smile, no more than a hint, mark you. Statues I ought to explain are a feature of most Roman Catholic Schools, not of course to be worshiped, as some people imagine, but as a reminder of the saint that we may direct our prayers, asking, for their intercession, perhaps as one mightn't look at a photograph.

On reaching the classroom the first thing I notice is the very large fireplace and the equally large fire guard, although no fire at that time as it was the middle of Summer, it would be something that later in the year I would appreciate very much. After that my eyes dance round the classroom, little green chairs and desks, displays all over the walls, and then my eyes alight on a sandpit with buckets and spades, which reminds me, where do your own

go to. On a visit to the seaside new ones bought on each occasion, only to disappear into the ether, never to be seen again, similar to lost socks later in life, however I digress.

At the back of Miss Dickinson's desk, yes you've guessed, another statue, this one of The Virgin Mary, much smaller than her saintly companions in the main hall, and looking in good humour, with a definite smile on her face. On closer inspection I notice that her nose had been chipped more than once, and repainted, probably by Miss D. who in the following weeks I'm convinced can do anything. On her desk there's always a vase shaped jar of Gloy, (water based glue) with which she seems able to make anything, from birthday cards to little paper lanterns at Christmas time, all done without difficulty. I try to persuade Mam to buy a bottle of Gloy for home, so I can show her how to make paper chains and all the other things Miss D. has demonstrated, but Mam says flour and water mixed into a thick paste is just as good, "it's not as good" I protest, "there's a little brush in the jar at school" "well you can use the brush from your paintbox", says Mam in a you've gone your limit way. I realise I'm fighting a losing battle, and content myself with the thought that when I grow up I will be able to buy my own, plus anything else that takes my fancy.

The morning seems everlasting, and I keep wondering how they are coping at home, without me. I ask Miss Dickinson if it is possible to go home to make sure everything is as it should be, she assures me that all will be well, I'm not totally happy with her assurances. My mind's taken away from home by the announcement, "Thomas (me) Brian, and Martin your turn at the sandpit", much more fun than learning new prayers which had taken up the majority of the morning. Then at last, grace before meals, and the realisation that Mam would be waiting at the school gates.

Mam seems overjoyed at seeing me, I knew how much she would miss me. "Have you made some new friends" ?, "Is teacher nice?", the questions go on all the way home. When we arrive, my Auntie Maggie's waiting to welcome me, "here comes the big schoolboy!" she exclaimed. We have a nice dinner (lunch for our southern brethren), more questioning of course. Then like a bolt from the blue, Mam says "Wash your hands and face", time to go back to school, "WHAT twice in a day," I sigh. After a lot of persuading, and I mean a lot. We, three, this time, as Auntie Maggie decides to join Mam and me on the short walk to school. I'm not as happy as I was, only a few hours earlier, on my initial journey to St. Patrick's School for Young Gentlemen, as a sarcastic neighbour always referred to it.

I'm not aware of his sarcasm, and thought that was the full title of the establishment for many a long year. Thank goodness I never uttered it within the hearing of a teacher.

Grace after meals, the first prayer of the afternoon session, so to speak. Prayers completed. Miss Dickinson reads a story, and although I can remember almost everything of that day, I can't recall the contents, but I know I enjoyed it enormously, and wondered for the rest of my school life, why teachers didn't employ this method of teaching more often. I hope against hope for the call to the sandpit for a second time, alas the call never came. The afternoon passed much quicker than the morning, thanks, I think to the story. Afternoon prayers, thank God!, home time. Miss Dickinson says "that we've all been very good", and she was looking forward to seeing us tomorrow, (not if I can help thinks me) On the way through the main hall, I half look up at St. Patrick, and from that day, to this, I'm sure he gave a wry wink.