

Whit Monday.



Whit Monday morning has finally arrived, I live at the back of St.Patricks church, Mam has been up and about for hours, ironing, last minute alterations, cleaning and polishing, not to mention baking, in preparation for the many visitors we would most certainly receive on this very special day. The first thing I hear is the sound of the bands and the bagpipes tuning up, Mam has left the job of getting me up and ready, till as long as she dare, in case I get over excited.

I always need great persuasion to get from under the eiderdown, except on Whit Monday, Christmas Day, and come to think about it, Easter Sunday too. The teachers have been drilling us for weeks, on walking day etiquette, don't walk too close to the pavement, don't wave to people you know, and definitely "DO NOT TAKE MONEY", the latter instruction was almost universally ignored.

The excitement is palpable, it has been for weeks, possibly months, it is difficult to explain how important a day this celebration of Whitsun is in the homes of the Catholic community. Lining up outside school the teachers and the helpers, usually parish stalwarts, would remind all the children again on the etiquette of the day with the added proviso, not to walk too fast. Starting off at St Patricks Church we would process down Rupert Street, on to Darlington Street, very poor territory for me, being from the heart of the parish, I knew only a handful of people from that street, although my Dad had an auntie, who if she remembered me, might have been minded to give me sixpence, or being a relative, maybe a shilling, I looked unsuccessfully ever year for Auntie Maggie, or was it Mary, which ever, had she spotted me she would undoubtedly have given credence to the old maxim, bloods thicker than water.

After the poor pickings of Darlington Street, into Chapel Lane, then onto Caroline Street where the welcome (though not in financial terms) was absolutely unbelievable, the parishes of St. Josephs and St. Patricks, both with large Irish diaspora communities, had an affinity that was tangible, even to a child, I remember with great fondness the shouts of Come on The Pats from the old ladies of our sister parish.



On reaching the market square, to meet up with the other parishes, the two already mentioned, along with St. Marys, St. Johns and Sacred Heart. The heightened excitement, was taken to an even higher level, as hundreds and hundreds of people, and the massed bands seemed to have no end. The cacophony of sounds all added, strangely to the solemnity of the day and contrasted to the almost silence as the conductor mounted the rostrum, to lead the bands and the laity in hymns and The National Anthem, I think you would have needed to have been present to understand the feeling of nostalgia and pride, when Faith of our Fathers was sung, hairs on the back of your neck would stand to attention. The National Anthem was sung with equal gusto and then what seemed the long walk back to our parishes loomed.

The road ahead was going to be difficult, but realising that my best patch lay not too far away gave renewed vigour to my little legs, Scholes, Wellington Street ("The Wearing of the Green" ,always played when entering this street) and Hardybutts, full of Aunts, Uncles and older cousins, now working, as the modern saying goes "with disposable income", I would probably be able to buy a bike, or at the very least a scooter. The end result was a few Dinky Toys and a Yo-yo. I didn't want a bike anyway and scooters are only for babies.

On finally reaching home we were treated like returning heroes, having walked seven miles, forgive the poetic licence, be it seven, or three (nearer to the truth), it was a long way for the afore mentioned little legs. Now the business of the day to count the coins collected. We hadn't ignored the instruction 'Not to Take Money', but it would have been churlish to refuse, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Your home would be full of visitors, the table groaning with home baked pies, meat, meat and potato, apple, jam lattice and of course two flavours of jelly, along with Carnation milk, few in St. Pat's parish had a refrigerator in those far off days, although most could boast a meat safe, a cupboard with a mesh front, usually painted cream or white, I suppose

to make believe we had the next best thing to a fridge. I've never worked out why this device would keep meat, milk, or anything else for that matter any cooler than an ordinary cupboard.

All the aunties and female cousins would pitch in making pot after pot of tea, cutting the pies and cakes into equal sizes, they had to be equal to save any arguments among the children. As a child I always wondered where all the uncles and older male cousins were, and was told they were having a chat, only years later did I realise that the "chat" was taking place in one of the many public houses that adorned Scholes in those days. After the feast, the post-mortem, Mam had given orders that there should be no gossiping, everybody had done their best and that's what mattered. This diktat, along with the instruction from the teachers regarding money, alas was largely ignored. It was agreed that all the children looked lovely, but our parish just edged it, this sentiment would be common parlance in the homes of the other participating parishes of the walk.

Then down to brass tacks. The women of the parish, and their outfits, Agnes such-a-body, had that suit that had been on display in Vi Almonds window, it looked very nice in the window, pause, enough said, and then just to ram home the point "It wasn't right for the fuller figure", and the fur trim wasn't appropriate for Spring. Mary so-and-so, had that same hat, that had made three appearances before, or was it four, my memory's awful nowadays! The conversation goes on. Not gossiping you understand just expressing an opinion, you can do that even in Russia, Auntie Janey (Mam), says one cousin sullenly, having been admonished for unflattering remarks about a parishioners choice of frock, I think the K.G.B. might have something to say about that, mutters one of the more political aware cousins, almost under her breath. When Mam's back's turned, the conversation is returned to. However I digress

After a long day, all the guests had gone home Mam has tidied the house, and so to bed. Sleep doesn't come easily, after all the excitement of the day and thoughts of next year running through my head. I will be a year older and will consequently know more people, who I will not want to offend by refusing the well intended donation, and maybe, just maybe, my Dads Auntie Thingy, might spot me, she's very well off, she used have a chip shop, and if she does, I bet she'll give me ten shillings, to make up for past years. What with that and my new found friends I might get enough for a racing bike, with a dynamo, and in any case it will be a year nearer to be able to have a chat with my uncles. Sweet Dreams!