

# “There was a big ship sailing across her arse...”

by Eric Villiers

*A vivid picture of Armagh in the early 20th Century emerges from a memoir in the possession of the Irish-American family of Katherine Donnelly Toner. Mrs. Toner (nee Donnelly) who grew up in Armagh and died in Florida left behind a detailed chronicle of her childhood. Eric Villiers has been looking through the manuscript entitled “My True Story”.*

Catherine Donnelly Toner’s lifelong regret was that she never knew her mother. She died in 1979 without seeing as much as a photograph of the young red-haired woman who gave birth to her in Armagh on December 23, 1903.

One of the most poignant passages in Catherine’s memoir is the excitement and disappointment of a childhood trip into the country to meet “Sarah Horan... a woman out by the waterfalls” who had a picture of Catherine’s mother, Mrs. Mary Donnelly.

Sadly Sarah did not have the picture of Mary who had died a year after the birth of Catherine, the last of her seven children.

The children had to be boarded out with aunts and uncles. At first Catherine lived with her grocer aunt Lizzie Gray before moving on to another aunt, Kate Donnelly in English Street where she was to grow up

The memoir is studded with the names of dozens of relatives, friends and characters, who made an impression one way or another on the young Catherine: people like “Cockle Eyes” Charlie McCann who kept barrels of herrings outside his greengrocer’s shop; a mysteriously disfigured sailor; a naked demented ex-soldier; the ‘loose’ woman who ‘walked out’ with soldiers while her husband was away in the army and the filthy ragman, with his street cry: “John John the Candyman two sticks in every



*Lower English Street at the Shambles corner in the early 20th century*

hand. Pick up all your bottles and rags from the head of the bed to the foot of the cradle”.

## Writer's eye

Among her favourite haunts were Casey's Cosey Corner film theatre; The Picture Palace (which also staged Irish plays); Manney's Ice Cream Parlour; Billy Mills Paris Bun and Candy Shop; Cafolla's Cafe and Paddy McKenna's Pub where the men gathered and she went to get money from her butcher father.

Catherine Donnelly had a writer's eye which comes through strongly in recollections like this one about corporal punishment at the convent school: “Mrs. Hearn took us and put us over the desk, lifted our clothes up and started hitting us. Cissie Digby had a pair of split drawers made out of flour bags. There was a big ship sailing across her arse. Her mother didn't get the print out of the flour bags. I had a pair on too that had a faded gold medal flour sign written on them. They had a little lace on them. Aunt Lizzie kept all the flour bags. They were linen and we had all of our underwear made with them. Aunt Lizzie bought the lace up at the marketstand then she would pay a dressmaker to make the split drawers, and shifts too.”

## Religious differences

For all that Catherine had a high regard for the education she got from the “Madams of the Sacred Heart”, as the nuns at Mount Saint Catherine's were called: “...they taught us how to be ladies, how to eat our food, how to sit and stand and how to place our knife and fork upon the end of a meal. They taught us never to request a second helping of food even if still hungry. We were taught to never show our emotions or to laugh too heartily. We were taught always to remember that we were ladies and should act accordingly.”

Summers were spent around “Paddy's River ... Crummy's field ... the railway track ... [and] ... Armagh Lunatic Asylum” and religious differences were tolerated but ever present.

“On nice days we would go down the lane just three streets from our houses. There we would play in the nice green fields. The grass was like a carpet. There were lots of cows in the fields. We had to pass Sandy Row<sup>1</sup> an Orangeman's street. Their children always challenged us... If there were more than two of them they would grab us and make us curse the Pope. They called us ‘Papishes’ and on the 12th of July we could not pass their street at all”.

At another point Catherine cheekily reveals how the Catholic children trapped in the cursing dilemma sidestepped the issue by saying quickly, “Curse the Poke” or “Curse the Pomp”.

Catherine's chronicle clearly specifies the curse word as ‘Curse’. But were Armagh's Edwardian youngsters really so polite or did they use a four letter word that even in her later years Catherine couldn't bring herself to commit to paper. If so the nuns would have been proud of the job they'd done.

## Original Ecumenists

Toleration of the ‘other side’ comes through in Catherine's recollections of Sunday School excursions: “In summer all of the protestant churches went on a trip to Warren Point. We would sit on McCaffrey's wall and watch them coming home with all their gifts. They came up Railway Street and it was excitement for us. We never said or hollered anything at them. They came along 8 deep marching with their music and bands. They'd be dangling their beads and bangles, walking sticks and presents for their families”.

Here it's interesting to note the cultural change that may have taken place in only a generation.

Catherine absents herself

and her co-religionists from participation in the outings, yet in 1889 the records of the Armagh Train Disaster - when 88 people were killed on The Methodist Sunday School Excursion to Warrenpoint - show the deaths of nine Catholics. On the 100th anniversary of the tragedy the Rev Hamilton Skillen, Minister of Armagh Methodist Church wrote: “In an age free of sectarian bitterness, Methodist, Catholics, Presbyterians and Church of Ireland passengers set off for the seaside...They were the original Ecumenists who died together, never having heard that word<sup>2</sup>...”

## Danced all night

Other cultural changes were taking place and Catherine's generation may have been the last to dabble communally in an odd mix of Christian and pagan celebrations. She mentions several rituals that were still well embedded.

For example: “On June 28th, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, almost everyone in town would go out to Windmill Hill



Bannbrook school in the late 1960's

to the Holy Well. At midnight the water in the well would rise. There would be a dance on the Callan River Bridge. The people danced all night with music. People would get some water from the well then say their prayers for their intentions. Afterwards they would tie a rag or string around the tree, which grew over the well”.

Like many 20th Century children growing up in Armagh, the ‘Dirty River’ that ran through the town, was her adventure playground, where, discarding her shoes and socks, she would spend the day jumping back and forward along its banks

One river memory that stayed with her was the day she collected dozens of “goats’ pills...They were black and were the shape of bon bon sweets. We got some coca and sugar and rolled them in it. They looked just like bon bons. We gave them to all the boys on Banbrook Hill. The next day all their mothers were after us saying, “What did you give my wee Jimmie and Mickey?” It was always the boys we gave them to.”

## Social history

While the memoir is dotted throughout with colourful incidents that bring to life a child’s carefree days, it is also interesting in a more a general way as social history. In those decades before the welfare state the extended family remained so tight knit that, if needs must, married uncles, unmarried sisters and grandparents were expected to raise their relatives’ children, particularly orphans.

By the time Catherine was sixteen and ready to be sent to relatives in New York, World War One had robbed her of two of her four brothers, Bertie and James, both killed within a week of each other in France in November 1918 just as the war came to a close.

Pat (also in the British Army) and Joe (the US army) both survived but the double blow broke their father and he died on July 12, 1920.

That day, out of respect the local Orange lodges re-routed their parade away from the area.

Catherine Donnelly Toner died on October 2, 1979 in Miami, Florida and is buried in the Holy Cross Cemetery, North Arlington, New Jersey. ❖

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sandy Row was probably Protestant dominated Lonsdale Street

<sup>2</sup> The Fateful Day: A Commemorative Book of the Armagh Railway Disaster June 12, 1889 written by Damian Woods, published by Armagh District Council and Armagh County Museum

*Special thanks must be expressed to Adrienne Elalouf (pictured below as a young girl with her mother) for making freely available to Armagh & District history Group her mother’s written memories and for granting permission to use her family photographs.*



*L to R - Mary Ellen Reilly, Adrienne Donnelly-Toner, Elizabeth Gray (Aunt Lizzie) and Mrs. Catherine Donnelly-Toner who was visiting Armagh in 1951 with her daughter Adrienne.*



*Mrs. Catherine Donnelly-Toner (right) meeting Mary-Ellen Reilly at her house in Winder Place on a visit to Armagh in 1961*