

One

These Were My Parents

Carracastle in the first decades of this century was a straggly little village of thatched one-story cabins set in a fold of the foothills of the Ox Mountains, a few miles from the Atlantic Ocean in the bleak western part of County Mayo, Ireland. The higher land was stony and barren. The valleys were soggy from the almost continuous rain that swept in, warm and soft, from the Atlantic. It formed a misty medium, neither air nor water, in which land and stream and sky merged into a single ghostly vagueness. Harsher winds from the mountains in winter stirred the brown rushes bordering the many little lakes, home of the water hen, the mallard, and the goose. On a rare day in summer, the sun asserted his kingship, and then the pasture land shone with vivid greens that contrasted with the lustrous gold of the ripe oats and the bright yellows of the ubiquitous furze.

I was born in one of those cabins in 1909, and it was my home for the first nineteen years of my life. I always think that this was a great grace, not because it was a thatched

cabin, but because it was a home of prayer. Starting on their wedding day, my parents knelt each evening before the hearth to say together the family Rosary, that God and Mary might protect and bless their home and fill it with the laughter of children. God heard that daily prayer. He blessed my parents with a large family. They, for their part, expressed their gratitude in the way they knew best. In all the years of their married life they never once failed to gather the family every evening for the recitation of Mary's centuries-old prayer.

We were extremely close-knit as a family. It would have been hard for us to survive if we were not. There were eleven of us in all, four boys, five girls, and our parents, and we lived in this three-room thatched cottage in which my father's father and his father before him had raised similar families.

In the West of Ireland people are not demonstrative of their feelings, and the unity of this family was expressed less in high-sounding words or in gestures of friendship than in deeds. We all worked together, each carrying from earliest childhood his or her share of the unending round of labor involved in eking a livelihood for eleven persons out of fourteen acres of stony land worked without benefit of machines or sophisticated agricultural techniques. In that country, a child is raised once he learns to carry two sods of turf or peat from the rick at the gable end of the house to feed the open fire at the hearth. So runs a common saying. And from the time we were able to toddle, we all had our daily tasks and made our contribution to the common effort.

But our help to one another and our commitment to a common and mutually beneficial goal were something more than the organization of an anthill or a hive of bees. It was deep down a sense of love for each other based on a series of spiritual and moral ties, which made the well-being of the others more important to each individual than his own. When the swarm takes off, the new colony of bees forgets all about the hive from which it came. That was not the way in our family. Those who grew up and left home were still bound by unbreakable links. They continued to put the advantage of the others ahead of their own. They were ready to forego any personal benefit for the promotion of common purposes. And in fact, as I shall recount in more detail later, several members of my family literally sacrificed their lives to support me when I was in need and to help me toward a goal which represented not only my own heart's desire but the wish and ambition of all.

Such attitudes express the deepest tradition of that region and that culture. They are bound up with its religious sense and with its scale of values. But in our case, I believe they were intensified by the spirit and the spirituality of my father. This John Peyton, who married Mary Gillard of Rathreedane, Bonniclon, in March 1899, when he was thirty-two years old and she twenty-seven, was an extraordinary man. He was himself the eldest son of sixteen children, and his father's premature death had catapulted him as a teen-ager into the responsibility of breadwinner for his mother, brothers, and sisters. Both before and after he was married, he went to work on various occasions in England, as was the practice of the young men of all the West of Ireland. After the heavy work of preparing the land and

planting the crops, mostly by hand, they would earn additional money by hiring themselves out as harvest laborers in England, sometimes staying on as coal miners through the winter. Meanwhile the women and children would save the hay and oats of their own little farms, bring home the turf from the bog, and dig the potatoes.

My father also worked on building construction in England and learned the trade of stonemason. He practiced this trade in our own neighborhood, too, taking contracts to build dwelling houses, stables, and walls for local farmers and also to keep the local dirt roads in repair. But the grueling work begun while he was still a child quickly extorted its toll. About the time he was married, or not long afterward, he began to get acute attacks of bronchitis, and he became progressively less capable of physical exertion. So he was forced to restrict himself to supervision and direction, riding the horse out to the fields to watch while the rest of us worked.

The three eldest in the family were girls: Bridget, Mary, and Ellen. Bridget and Ellen are known in the family as Beatrice and Nellie respectively. These three girls and my mother had to carry the entire load for a long time. The earliest recollection I have of these three girls is seeing them as teen-agers doing the work of men on the farm, along with their mother. They were the ones who took the scythe to cut the oats, harnessed the horse and yoked him to the cart to bring out a load of stone to repair the holes in the road, and quarried the sand for the same purpose. I took it for granted that women cut the oats and plowed the fields. That was how we kept going until the three boys who followed,

Michael, Thomas, and myself, reached in turn an age at which we could make a significant contribution.

We all did our best, but the inability of the one who possessed the skills, my father, to take the active lead was inevitably reflected in our economic level. To fill eleven mouths and clothe eleven bodies from the produce of so meager a farm is not easy, and there was no revenue from other sources until the two eldest girls left for America in 1920 and began to send money home. After that, things looked up a little, in spite of the general disruption of the economy caused by the Black and Tan War and the Civil War that followed in the early 1920s. But in the meantime the going was rough, and we were lucky when we had our fill of potatoes, cabbage, turnips, soda bread, butter, eggs, and an occasional mouthful of fat bacon. The Peytons are big-framed, large-boned, energetic people, with rapid metabolisms. In my late fifties, I can still eat a second dinner without putting on weight. Am I, perhaps, subconsciously compensating for the hunger which was then my frequent companion?

My father grieved much that he could not do more for us. It hurt him particularly when the time came for one of us to leave home. He felt that it was his duty to hold the family group together until he was satisfied that each had acquired the maturity to stand honorably on his own feet. During his various stays in England, he had seen how some young Irish people had abandoned their moral principles and religious practice once they were away from the supports and safeguards of home. He himself had not made that mistake. On the contrary, he had deepened his religious experience. He was, for example, the very first to introduce in the neighborhood the practice of receiving Holy

Communion on the first Friday of each month in honor of the Sacred Heart. I remember from my early childhood that the two oldest children, Beatrice and Mary, used to go to the early Mass in the church at Ballina. That was long before the devotion had been established in our own parish of Atty-mass. But my father feared that if we left home too soon, we might not be strong enough to withstand the temptations to which we would be exposed. He wanted to keep us near him, and I believe he found it hard to reconcile himself to his poor health mainly because the resultant poverty forced some of his children to go away to work at an early age.

If he could not do everything for us that he wanted, he did what he could. He was a man of total integrity, so that we could always look up to him. Although we were the only family of our name in the village and had no close relatives in it, everyone there respected my father. He was tall and powerfully built, and a heavy mustache and deep, penetrating eyes gave him an air of distinction. He spoke two languages fluently and correctly—Gaelic and English—and he had natural qualities of leadership. The neighbors consulted him on their problems and welcomed his views on political and other issues. He was scrupulously honest in all his dealings.

He was strict with us as children, but he was honest and open in the circle of the family as well as outside. From about the time Beatrice was fourteen, he put her in charge of activities in the fields, while my mother worked mainly in and around the house, caring for the animals and poultry, as well as preparing food. We engaged in typical mixed farming. We kept a horse for the farm work, raised cattle,

pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese, grew potatoes, oats, turnips, cabbage, and onions.

Beatrice received the orders for each day's work, and the rest of us were instructed to obey her. Whatever the job, we were expected to do it thoroughly. Each evening, she made a full report of the day's accomplishments and received instructions for the next day. Beatrice was a perfectionist, and she insisted that we measure up to her own performance and standards. But she was no tyrant. My father knew how to maintain discipline without violence. He never raised his hand to us, nor would he have allowed Beatrice to treat us harshly had she wanted to. It was a different spirit entirely, a sense of a cooperative effort in which each gladly played his part. At the end of the year, when all the crops were harvested and the cattle and pigs sold, an inventory was taken. My father gave a full report to the entire family, even the youngest. We knew how much money we had and how it would be spent. We all sought for ways to stretch our meager fund, to increase the total, or to lighten the demands on it.

The dominant quality of my father, the one that gave a unity to all the rest, was his great spirit of faith. This, of course, is characteristic of the culture in which I was raised. The language is sprinkled with expressions of piety. Heaven and earth are intertwined in the mind and the imagination. We lived among holy wells, the memories of saints who had labored in the same fields, the hiding places of persecuted priests, and the rocks on which they had celebrated the Mass.

All of this was embodied in my father to a high degree. In his presence, one felt uplifted, almost like being in church.

I don't mean that he preached to us. What impressed me was the way he lived and the way he prayed, especially when each evening we all knelt together to say the Rosary. If there was one inflexible rule in our home, it was that every one of us had to participate in the family Rosary led by my father. It didn't matter how hard or how long the day's work—digging potatoes, cutting turf, or repairing a road. Often one or another would drop to sleep on his knees. But he was always brought back into the prayer, kindly but firmly. It was the entire family praising God, asking Him through His Mother to protect it, to guide it to the destiny He had intended for it. That nightly scene constitutes my earliest memory and the most abiding. From it I derive the entire pattern and purpose of my existence.

Other than the Rosary, we did not engage much in formal prayer. We went, of course, to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, climbing on foot to the parish church at Atty-mass three miles away, in which I had been baptized on January 13, 1909, just four days after my birth. And, as I said, we went down to Ballina, a little farther in a different direction, to make the First Fridays before that devotion had become known in our parish. Later, our pastor introduced it, and we then began to attend in our own parish church of St. Joseph at Attymass. In addition, there was the major event twice a year, about Easter and in October, when the pastor came for "the stations." That was a custom going back to the days of persecution in Ireland, when there was neither church nor resident priest. A priest would then come in stealth at infrequent and irregular intervals to hear confessions, say Mass, and distribute the Eucharist in a secluded spot. The practice had survived in "the

stations.” Each time, the priest selected a different house in the village, and all assembled there to confess their sins, assist at Mass, and receive Holy Communion. Each family was proud when its turn came, and no effort was spared in whitewashing the walls inside and out and otherwise making the place spotlessly clean for the occasion.

In our dealings with our father, we could never forget that he was the one who made the decisions. Our mother, on the other hand, was a peaceful loving woman. I don’t remember ever seeing her get mad except once, and that time she had plenty reason for it. She loved Michael, the eldest boy, more than any of us. Sometimes, when we were growing up, I would set out mischievously to provoke him, until one fine day Mother decided I had gone too far and told him to let me have it. He gave me a real wallop, and after that I was a little more respectful. But she herself never once laid a hand on me in all the years, no matter how great the provocation.

Because of my father’s illness, she worked even harder than most of the other women in the village, and God knows they all had to do their share. I recall, for example, seeing her out in the field spraying the potatoes, a job that had to be done twice or perhaps three times in June and July, depending on the weather and the incidence of the blight. The metal knapsack sprayer with its hand-operated pump held nearly four gallons of spray. As a child I would help to mix the lime and copper sulphate in the barrel of water at the end of the potato field and ladle the mixture into the sprayer. She would then hoist it on her back and march up and down the rows of potatoes to cover the stalks

with the blue liquid, a task which on each occasion required several grueling days of effort to complete.

In spite of this and similar tasks, she was as straight as a ramrod. Though not as tall as my father, she was taller than any of the neighboring women. She wore the same long wide skirts as they did, and like them wrapped her head and the upper part of her body in a heavy black shawl when she went out. But even that rough clothing could not hide her beautiful face and lovely figure. She had long silky hair, which she would often let me comb for her when I was a boy. When I was saying good-by to her for the first and last time in 1928, she was fifty-six years old, yet her hair was still black. Nor was her character soured in the least. On top of all the work, she had a hard time trying to anticipate the moods of my father, for it is not easy to be the wife of an invalid, even if he is a good man. Yet my last memory is of a woman still with the beautiful qualities of peace, joy, radiance, and balance. And she was full of fun, always ready for a prank or a joke. We were never afraid of her. We could confide our secrets to her and count on her to win some little privilege for us that we would hesitate to ask directly of our father.

It was a common practice in Ireland for one or another of the children to go for a time to live in the home of a relative. Usually, there was some practical reason. It might be to ease the burden on a mother who had several tiny children by taking one of them from under her feet for a while. Or it might be that the other home lacked a young boy or girl to run messages and help around the place. I was sent twice to stay with my mother's parents, Robert Gillard and his wife, Kitty, of Rathreedane, Bonniconlon. The first time was

before I started school, so I guess the reason was to get me off my mother's hands. She nearly died of puerperal fever when I was born, and although she recovered completely, it was not long until Sarah came along, to be followed by John and Kitty.

I returned to my parents' home in time to be enrolled in the grade school at Bofield, less than half a mile away, in May 1914, when I was just over five years of age. The school was known as the national school, and it was in fact a public school. Teachers and children were all Catholics, however, and the local pastor was the school manager. Under the Irish system, a half hour is set aside daily for religious instructions, Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish, according to the religion of the pupils. In our neighborhood at that time there were no Protestant families. The Bofield school, accordingly, was to all intents and purposes the equivalent of a parochial school in the United States.

Apart from the church, which was in a category all its own and which we didn't think of as a building in the ordinary sense, the school was by far the most impressive construction in the neighborhood. It had big windows and high ceilings supported by cobwebbed beams. The slated roof further distinguished it from the thatched cottages around. It was, I suppose, the size of a four-car garage, but in my young imagination it figured as the biggest and most important building in the world. This was the home of learning for some fifty boys and sixty girls ranging in age from five to fourteen or fifteen years. We were divided into three classrooms, the oldest group under the charge of Tadhg O'Leary, the principal, the middle group under his wife, and the smallest ones under Maria Loftus. Tadhg

was an outsider, a native of County Kerry, but his wife was Maria Kelly from Bonniconlon. In addition to the grade school, Tadhg conducted an advanced school in a separate room in the same building. Boys and girls from over a wide area came to be coached for entrance examinations to teacher-training colleges, the girls living in dormitories in the O’Leary home and the boys boarding out in neighboring homes.

Here it was that I took my first hesitant steps on the royal road to learning under the guidance of Maria Loftus, helped at times by a “monitor” from among the teacher candidates. We sat on long wooden benches, the timbers of which bore the names or initials of earlier generations of pupils. Maps on the walls identified by color countries and continents which meant nothing to us and also the two countries which we all knew vaguely would one day beckon most of us—England and the United States. Heating in the winter was provided by an open fire in a single grate, a fire for which each of us carried sods of turf from his home along with the couple of slices of soda bread that made his lunch.

Maria Loftus took me through the first three grades, teaching me the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Yet it was not what she taught that affected me as much as the way she taught it. She treasured her innocent charges, made us feel important, left a warm mark on us. Among all my teachers, she stands out in my mind. Only Father Cornelius J. Hagerty, my professor of ethics at Notre Dame, left a greater mark on me, making a decisive contribution in what I regard as the supreme crisis and turning point in my life.

I went to live with my grandparents at Rathreedane for a second time in the summer of 1917, and now I was enrolled at the school in Bonniconlon, where by coincidence a brother of Maria Loftus was my teacher. This time the reason for sending me to my grandparents was to give a hand about the house. My grandfather was not only old but an invalid and practically blind. It was dangerous to leave him alone in the house, and it often fell to me to keep an eye on him while the others were out at work. In retrospect, the period I then spent with him was very important in my life. Dominick Melvin, the village blacksmith, was a frequent visitor. Nell Gallagher, a neighbor, would come in at night to sit by the hearth and smoke her short clay pipe when her work was finished, and her husband, Patrick, would sometimes come with her. Then my grandmother would light up my grandfather's clay pipe for him, and the conversation would range far and wide, always eloquent. As I sat spellbound in the warm recess of the fireplace, I learned things about the family and the community which otherwise I'd probably never have known.

The Gillards were people of some distinction in their village. In fact that part of it where they lived was often known as Gillardstown. According to a strong local tradition, the first Irish Gillard was a Napoleonic soldier. During his war with England, Napoleon had invaded Egypt in 1794, and he simultaneously sent a small diversionary force to Ireland, where conditions for revolt were ripe. A thousand Frenchmen, with arms for a much bigger force, landed in August at Killala, about thirteen miles from our village, were joined by a big but untrained force of local farmers, and quickly drove the English garrisons from Killala,

Ballina, and Castlebar. While the main force marched east toward Dublin to be defeated by a strong English army at Ballinamuch, County Longford, a smaller party moved northeast through Bonniconlon toward Sligo. Learning of the defeat and surrender of their comrades at Ballinamuch, they tossed their arms into a small lake in the Ox Mountains near Bonniconlon, still known as Lough na Gunnai or the Lake of the Guns, and dispersed. Most were repatriated, but some went home with their Irish comrades-in-arms and in due course married Irish wives. One of these was my grandfather's grandfather.

Life in the Gillard home was very like that in Carracastle. My grandfather was a man of the same deep spirituality as my father. The family Rosary was here equally the dominant moment of the day. While there was no artificial piety about his conversation, religious themes formed an integral part of it, even when he was recounting for me the local folklore.

A major feature of the village of Rathreedane, for example, is a prehistoric fort about forty yards in diameter and surmounted by a granite pillar some twelve feet high known as the Pillar Stone of Ruadhain's fort. The Ruadhain family, as my grandfather explained to me, were local chieftains at the time of St. Patrick in the fifth century. This, of course, was country evangelized by the saint in person. Only twenty miles away to the southwest, near Westport, is Croaghpatrick. On the top of this cone-shaped mountain, tradition says, Patrick fasted forty days and forty nights until he wrung from God a promise that Ireland would, until the end of time, cling to the faith he had brought it. One of the Ruadhains joined St. Patrick to work as his chief herdsman.

The society was semi-nomadic, so that it was normal for Patrick to travel with his flock of goats and maintain himself while he preached the Gospel. This Ruadhain established a church in our neighborhood when Patrick moved on, and he is still revered as a saint.

We had other saints among our neighbors, too: Muredach or Molaisse, Garbhan, Fechin, Cumian, Olcan, Attracta, Nathy, and Gerald, and many whose names I no longer remember but who were associated with ruins of churches and abbeys. They were my constant companions, as during the infinitely lingering twilight of those long summer evenings of 1917 I wandered along the winding little roads fragrant with new-mown hay or sat with my grandfather by the fireside and with my childish questions drew up from his long memory the traditions of fifteen hundred years. It was a home like my own. Living there confirmed the image I already possessed of what life was and should be in a normal Christian family. I could happily have remained there indefinitely. Instead, this second stay with my grandparents lasted only some months. I was fetched home again to Caracastle before the end of 1917.