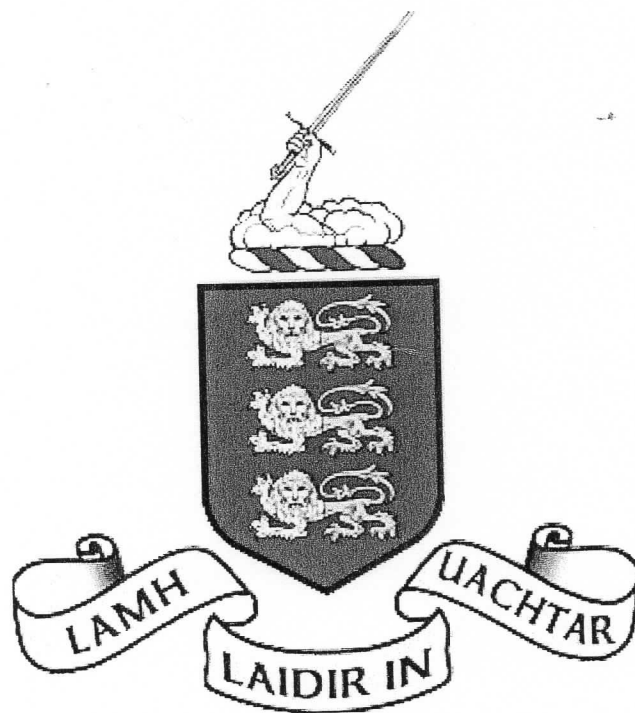


Memories of a Kerry Boyhood

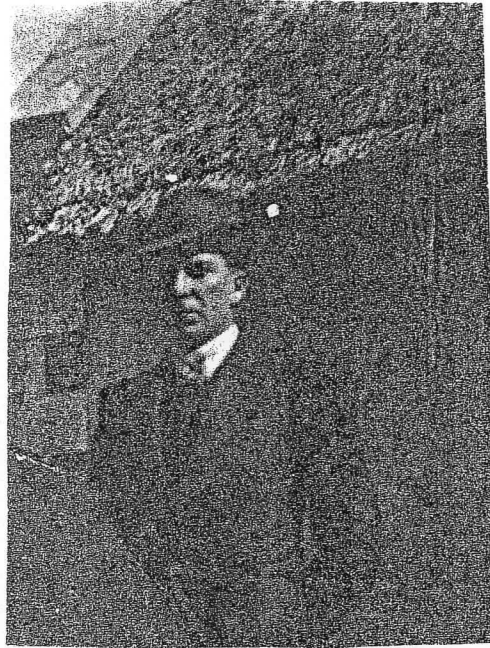
By William O' Brien
of Beenativaun, Currow



1920 - 1994

Died on July 17th 1994

**William O' Brien
Beenativaune
Currow
Killarney
Co Kerry
Ireland**



Born 1910

He contracted polio at a young age and walked with a limp all his life. As a child he went to the local school in Currow Village on a donkey's back, being unable to walk the three miles.

He emigrated to London where he worked in the Post Office and married Margareta from Austria. They had no children. He died of cancer in 1994.

Memories of a Kerry Boyhood

Looking back over what can be considered a fairly long life, I feel that I have witnessed in my time a period which has seen the dawn of the greatest change, in all respects, in recorded world history.

In our parish in the 1920s there were about 3 motor cars owned by the parish priest, the creamery manager and a young schoolteacher named Denis Healy. To see a motorcar was an event and to get a ride in one was a subject for conversation for many weeks.

At that time the horse ruled supreme. Every farmer of any consequence owned two horses usually the all-purpose Irish Draught. The Irish Draught horse was noted for its courage and immense stamina as well as for its versatility. As well as doing the heavy work in the fields – drawing the plough, the harrow and the mowing machine, they were capable of being switched to the trap or sidecar and they also performed quite well in the role of saddle horse.

However, in the case of independent farmers, a pony or cob was kept for harnessing to the trap. These animals were driven to the market or to mass on Sundays resplendent in polished harness with brightly polished buckles causing envious glances from those less fortunate.

Mixed farming was the order of the day. A well stocked holding consisted of a herd of dairy cattle, a flock of sheep, pigs, chickens, hens, ducks and geese.

My father, Charles O'Brien with my mother Julia, owned a farm of about 150 acres consisting of moorland, peat bog, wetlands and containing about 80 acres of reasonably good arable land. In many ways he was a successful farmer. He was among the first to do the spring ploughing and planting and in the autumn his haggard and hay barns were full to overflowing.

According to the custom of the time he favoured mixed farming with a milking herd of dairy shorthorn cows, usually from 25 to 30 in numbers. The calves were never sold as veal but reared to the stage when they were ready for beef production. This varied somewhat in years when grass was scarce in which case a number of yearlings were sold for cash at one of the cattle fairs in Castleisland.

There was also a flock of sheep which as well as producing wool, provided lambs for the market in season. My mother kept chickens, ducks and geese and quite frequently turkeys with the result that the farmland was always a babble of noise with the rooster and young turkey cocks often engaged in deadly combat.

How she even found time to do all she had to do is a mystery. She had a family of ten, six girls and four boys among whom I, the second boy, was placed seventh. For this family of 12 my mother did all the cooking, baking, sewing, decorating and cleaning and to a great extent making a high proportion of the girl's clothes and all the boys and men's shirts on her Singer sewing machine.

The bread most commonly baked was soda bread with the occasional variation of golden mixed bread, the golden colours coming from the addition of a few cupfuls of finely ground Indian corn. This bread tasted delicious when eaten with butter and cold skimmed milk for supper at the end of long laborious summer days.

To the modern housewife my mother's life would seem like one of abject slavery but this thought would never occur to her. She was invariably cheerful and happy and in her small world she would have considered herself lucky and self-fulfilled. Surrounded by numerous family, neighbours and friends who were always ready to help in times of illness and distress.

She was in turn the living epitome of the Good Samaritan, always willing to answer a neighbour's call for help in cases of accidents, illness and on occasion acting as a stand-in for the midwife when the new arrival was in an unseemly hurry or when the mid wife was slow in arriving.

The even tenor of life was broken by events such as births, marriages and deaths and except in the untimely death of a young person, all three were more or less occasions for celebration. Invariably, babies were baptised within 24 hours of birth as delay was considered to be irresponsible and a risk to the baby's entry to Heaven if it were to die suddenly and unbaptised.

The baptism was usually followed by a party in the parents home which was known as wetting the 'baby's head'. This party was a small intimate affair involving close relatives, a few friends and neighbours. Tea and cake were served to the ladies and perhaps whiskey and Guinness to the men.

Weddings, in particular among the farming folk were occasions for rejoicing and festivity par excellence and no expense was spared in providing the best music and fare, not so much for the wedding breakfast as for the Gander night. The feast was so called, presumably, because in its origins a gander or goose were the central piece on the festive board. The marriages were usually arranged between the parents of the young couple and sometimes with the help of a close friend or relative who acted as an unpaid matchmaker. The prospective bride or bridegroom would, of course, have the final word and could refuse to take part if the suggested partner didn't measure up to expectations. There was a case of the reluctant bride in our parish when on the morning of the wedding the young lady found that she couldn't go ahead with it and escaped out the bedroom window at the first light of dawn and sought refuge in a friend's house. But generally speaking the ground was well researched in advance and the young couple's consent was sought before the more serious question of a dowry was breached.

Every farmer's daughter who wished to marry a young farmer was obliged to pay a dowry to the father of the bridegroom as this money in turn became the dowry of his daughter. The size of the dowry depended on size or wealth of the farm to which the young bride was bound and the larger the sum involved the happier the young lady would be as it reflected her worth and also the material prospects of her new life. The system worked remarkably well and the marriages were nearly always happy ones.

After mass in the brides parish church at which the wedding ceremony took place the newly married couple in a horse and carriage, a sidecar or pony trap, set out for the brides old home, accompanied by relatives and guests travelling in all sorts of conveyances. There used to be custom, which died out in the previous generation in which young rascals would run a rope barrier across the road, holding up the wedding party until they were handed over a small sum of money usually two or three shillings or whatever the bridegroom would wish

to give. It was looked upon as a humorous diversion, which was common on such occasions, and nobody took exception to it.

Meanwhile, back at the home of the bride's parents there was an air of excitement and feverish activity as a group of ladies prepared the wedding feast. With the arrival of the bride and groom, the house rapidly filled up and after a hearty breakfast the floor was cleared for dancing and the festivities continued right through to daylight next morning. In the course of the evening the party was gate crashed by a group of varying sizes from 10 to 15 or more persons wearing masks and old hats with leggings made of straw, all designed to disguise the individuals. These uninvited guests were known as 'Straw Boys'. The captain congratulated the young couple and wished them success and happiness in their union and then the captain or leader of the group invited the bride to partner him in a dance to which she agreed to do as was the custom. A request was frequently made to the straw boys for one of their numbers to sing a favourite ballad and on complying each member was given a drink after which they departed in high good humour, all speaking in high pitched false voices.

Going away on holiday for the honeymoon was practically unheard of, or when it did occur, it usually comprised of a few days in a hotel in Killarney or Tralee. It was a case of business as usual and naturally, for the young bride it was time of stress adapting to the customs of a new home, being conscious that she was being observed all the time by her mother-in-law whose ideas on housekeeping may differ widely from her own. Generally speaking the mother-in-law retreated into the background with good grace leaving the young mistress to manage in her own way. Inevitably, there were instances where the old mistress was unwilling to take a back seat, refusing to accept change, which naturally led to domestic friction.

In the majority of cases the old lady was given a new lease of life with the arrival of the first grandchild. The grandmother assumed responsibility for the washing, feeding and dressing the children once they had passed the infancy stage. They were ideally suited to this role as they had more time, more patience and more experience than the natural mother. Consequently, the children were often closer to granny and in time of trouble went to her for advice and consolation. Looking back on my own childhood days I feel I owe a great deal to my grandmother. One could always depend on her for a sympathetic ear and she treated us children with the courtesy and attention that she would accord to an adult. She invariably washed, dressed and combed the hair of the younger children and was a wonderful help to my mother. It is all different nowadays as grandma is banished to live in a granny flat.

While the newly married couple had their problems with getting to know each other, they were as nothing compared to those of prospective brides and grooms. The most popular time for weddings in the farming community was in the early spring before the planting season really begun and before the commencement of the traditional period of fasting and penance known as Lent.

No weddings were celebrated during Lent, which began with Ash Wednesday, a day of strict fast and abstinence. As a direct result of this, there was a rush to get married by eligible couples to beat the deadline and by far the most popular day was Shrove Tuesday, the last day before the commencement of Lent.

There was a peculiar tradition that the season of Lent commencing on the mainland didn't come into force on the offshore island of Skellig Michil in the Atlantic west of Kerry until some days later. Heaven only knows who one last chance to dilatory couples to beat the Lenten deadline.

The local bands and satirists used the idea to poke fun at the courting couples who failed to get wed before Ash Wednesday and quite often boys and girls got their names linked on the slimmest of evidence. The ballads were often well composed, technically very correct and abounding in wit, sometimes coupled with mild sarcasm. This practice was referred to as the Skelligs List. But this island had far more to command it than that of the rendezvous of frustrated lovers in Lent. It was here in Ballinskeligs to give it its modern name, that civilisation was preserved after becoming the victim of barbarism throughout Western Europe in the middle ages.

It was to these remote islands off the coast of Kerry and to Iona in the Hebrides that the Christian monks retreated with their manuscripts in advance of the invading hordes from the East who had desecrated the seats of learning and religion (throughout Western Europe) in their advance westward.

In our part of East Kerry that is the Currow, Killeentierna/Farranfore area, lampooning reluctant brides and bachelors goes back into the mists of time. It was very much alive in the 1920s, when a group of young men led by one Charlie O'Brien of Dicks Grove raised the art to a new height. Their best Skelligs List was probably that for the year 1928. At that time Charlie, its leading band was the chief engineer at the local creamery, owned and run by Tom Dennehy, a local entrepreneur. The creamery was known then as it is to day as Dicks Grove Creamery and it was while working there that perhaps, Charlie thought up some of the still well remembered lines that at the time became part of the local folklore.

The following are some excerpts from the Skelligs List of the year 1928. The clouds of war were beginning to loom over the horizon in Europe and very soon on economic depression in the form of the Economic War was to devastate agriculture, the principal provider of wealth in the country, leading to unemployment and mass emigration, but despite all that, the tone of the ballads is one of optimism and dry humour which endeavoured to conform to tradition and continuity in a lifestyle that was soon to disappear forever.

'As the New Year is growing older, and Shrove has passed away,
With regards to some sweethearts, I have just a work to say.
How sad for their forlorn hearts, it was an awful shock, for those poor disappointed hearts,
Who face tonight, the lonely Skelligs Rock.
My lines are in offensive and I hope I won't be blamed; no one should think this heart of
mine, for mockery was framed.
Oh no, or God for bid it should, these lines were made for sport,
They'd prove essential and suffice for lads who went to court.'

From time immemorial there was always a good deal of poverty both in the towns and countryside of County Kerry. With its mountains, lakes and moorland it is one of the most scenic in all Ireland but because of this variety much of the land was either hilly or bog land and suitable only for rough grazing. Nevertheless, there are many areas of rich arable land to be found throughout the county and Kerry has been more than self sufficient in all sorts of agricultural products such as beef, bacon, mil, butter, cheese, lamb wool and all sorts of cereals with the possible exception of wheat. Wheat will grow well in the county as was demonstrated during the war but to obtain the best milling quality wheat a temperature of 80° c is needed in the ripening period of July and August. Such temperatures are rare in Ireland.

In the poorest districts in which the average size farm is between 50 and 80 acres and with large families to support, poverty was endemic. Emigration to the United States or Britain or the Colonies provided the only ray of hope of escape from unemployment and want for the majority of people.

After the great famine of 1846-47, millions of people took refuge in the 'coffin ships' to find a livelihood building the roads and railways in the New World across the sea. Small uneconomic holdings with their thatched cabins were deserted and in the parish of Killeentierna there are thousands of traces of cabins

In our own farm in Beenativaun there are traces of at least three cabins still visible and some of the fields are named after the long departed previous owners, such as Moll Leahy's field and Coakley's meadow.

I remember, when I was a boy, my old neighbour Paddy O Sullivan telling me that between the two town lands of Currow City and Farrankeal, a distance of about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, that eight thatched cabins lined that stretch of road. All these disappeared with the great exodus to the New World at the end of the nineteenth century. My grandmother who hailed from Ballygree, near Castleisland, had some harrowing tales to tell of the poverty and in some cases, absolute starvation that she had witnessed. There was one particular instance that clung to her memory of the body of a dead man lying by the wayside on the road to Currow. This man had been chewing grass apparently as there were traces of dried green juice around his mouth.

She also said that the majority of the fences in the upper part of the farm, which was presumably reclaimed land, had been built for a penny a day with food, by local labourers, who were glad to get work of any kind in order to keep body and soul together.

However, in more abundant times, the Irish peasant was physically strong with an extraordinary capacity for endurance. They had to be strong and they had to be tough, as in the absence of any transport they had to fulfil the role of beasts of burden in their daily lives. I once saw Tom Reidy of Knockbee lift a plough which he had come to borrow from my father, on to his shoulders and convey it for over a mile to his small holding over some of the roughest terrain imaginable. I doubt if there is a man living who could do that today. Yet he wasn't a big man. It seems as if nature over the centuries had fashioned these people to cope with the conditions under which they lived.

My grandmother oft recalled the fact that Moll Coakley took a basket of turf on her back to Killarney to sell in order to buy tobacco for her father. This she did every Saturday, once again over difficult country without the advantage of a road, merely following a footpath. This was a remarkable feat of endurance, as Killarney is a good eight miles from where Moll lived. Incidentally she was one of the family after which our meadow was named.

At threshing time it was quite common to see men carry twenty stone bags of oats on their backs and even to mount the stairs to the loft, so laden. Among country folk physical

strength and courage was everything. At weddings and wakes and on all social occasions, stories of heroic contests between workmen using the scythes for mowing the spade and lifting potatoes and the pitchfork for handling the hay and the corn at threshing time were often told with the true story teller's gift for drama.

When the hay crop was ready for mowing in August, it was usually contracted out to journeymen scythe mowers at an agreed price per acre. These men were experts with the scythe and reaping an acre of hay in a day was within the scope of the best of them. They travelled around the county taking on work where available. If the work happened to be a long way from home they then lodged in the farmhouse providing the work. The lodgings of course included food as well.

Some of the wandering labourers travelled enormous distances in search of employment and after the harvesting was finished some handy individuals set off for Tipperary and Limerick with their spades on their shoulders to earn some money lifting the potato crop.

After the dawn of the twentieth century, the wandering labourer became a fast diminishing species but the journeyman tailor, cobbler, dancing-master and fiddler continued to survive up till the outbreak of the Second World War.

I well remember a journeyman cobbler named Maurice Gloucester who traversed the roads of Kerry mending the boot and shoes of entire households more or less for his keep. The sums of money paid for his services were merely nominal, usually whatever the householder wished to give.

Another character that was known far and wide was a horse trainer, water diviner and well sinker named Den Silk Bradley. He was very proficient at his various jobs, but nevertheless he was a real eccentric and quite a character. His surname was Bradley but he was known as Den Silk. Although not a big man his physical strength and his courage in the face of danger were proverbial. He seemed to relish a challenge from whatever quarter it came and as a horse trainer and sinker of artesian wells, using dynamite, danger and risk were his constant companions. One of his idiosyncrasies was that he claimed to be psychic and often received messages from outer space. He was fairly widely read and when the occasion demanded it he could stand up, take the middle of the floor and recite Dan McGrew, Sam McGee as well as several other, often long and humorous recitations. He had a fantastic memory for story telling. I have heard him in my youth tell extraordinary stories of fairies and witchcraft that would take a full hour to relate. When these long stories were retold they never varied by as much as a single sentence.

Den Silk was a bachelor of no fixed abode. He traversed the county, living with the family for whom he worked. Every now and again he fell head over heels in love with some pretty servant girl. When he happened to fall in love, the current object of his infatuation was showered with gifts. To one particular young wench he bestowed and inscribed a gold watch among other things. The young ladies as a rule never returned his love and they were able to accept the gifts without too much commitment as he worshipped from a distance and never made any unacceptable demands on the objects of his love.

He really struck it rich when he drew a horse in the Irish Hospital Trust Sweepstake. The horse he drew was unplaced in the race but for every horse drawn, a sum of £450 was paid and this was the sum which he received. This was a considerable sum of money in the days when the average agricultural wage for a man was 15 shillings a week.

To impress his current ladylove, one named Maggie McCarthy, a maid who worked for my aunt Mrs Anne McSweeney of Ranaleen, he purchased a new Ford Eight saloon car. His problem was that he never mastered the art of driving. While he was very much at home on horseback or with any sort of horse drawn conveyance, he was a danger both to himself and everybody else when seated behind the wheel of his new automobile. He drove erratically

through the narrow lanes of East Kerry and many the pedestrian had to dive for safety into a hedge as he drove fast at breakneck speed. The time to be really wary of this demon driver was when he was out to impress one the ladies he fancied. On one such occasion John Francis O Connor was hit and knocked off his bike on his way home from the pub. The aforementioned Maggie McCarthy was a passenger at the time and Dan was breaking previous speed records in order to impress her. Fortunately the victim was only hit by a glancing blow and he suffered no injury.

Dan's new found wealth didn't last very long and he eventually sold the car to Father Galvin, the local curate in Killeentierna.

John Francis O Connor, the victim of Den Silk's erratic driving, was a bachelor who owned a medium sized farm at the tip of Kilsarcon. He came from an intellectual family, many of whom were famous for their poetry and rhyming skills. John Francis was misplaced in life as a farmer and instead of tilling the soil he was to be found more often in Bill Daly's pub in Currow. He had an uncle who ran a pub and general store in Castleisland which was invariably referred to as O Connors, 'The Poets'. Before the second world war there was very little specialisation and most of the small shopkeepers dealt in a variety of goods and services. In the village of Currow, for instance, Bill Daly was grocer, baker, butcher, publican, tea merchant, cattle dealer and undertaker. One could say that he dealt in all that was necessary for the local community from the cradle to the grave. Bill had a boyish sense of humour and was a notorious practical joker like the April fools day when he got 'Danny the Dane', an innocent son of the soil to deliver a sack of stones to the master of Clounclough National School on his creamery cart, on his way home from Dicksgrove Creamery. The head teacher, John O Donoghue was not amused and insisted that the sack was removed right away. As was customary in those days the parents were responsible for providing turf (peat) for the heating of the school and Denny the Dane, whose name was O Rourke, thought he was delivering a sack of coal.

At the time when all entertainment in music, dance and storytelling was provided by the local aspiring artists, there was as a rule a rich source of talent in every parish, ever ready to entertain at weddings and ceilidhes. These people were never offered nor did they expect payment for their services. There was hardly a townland in the whole of Kerry that didn't have a number of recognised ballad singers, story tellers, melodeon and concertina players, but above all there was an amazing amount of traditional fiddle players who produced music of a very high standard.

Foremost among these were Denny Tarrant, Billy Murphy (blind Billy), Johnny Dennehy, Sonny Mangan and perhaps the greatest of them all was Padraigh O Keefe of Glountane, Scartaglen.

Padraigh started his career as a National school teacher, teaching in the local school at Glountane. His was a free spirit quite unsuited to the daily grind so he resigned from teaching after a short time and took to the roads on his bicycle giving lessons on the violin to young pupils in their own homes. All of these music masters have now passed on having joined the great orchestra in the sky but even today years after his death mention of Padraigh O Keefe evokes memories of joy and gladness coupled with nostalgia for the passing of one who was described as the last great fiddle master of Sliabh Luachra.

Unlike many of his contemporary traditional fiddlers, he was able to read music and he even devised a system of his own which was simpler to read than the orthodox method.

Many famous violinists in East Kerry today owe a debt of gratitude to Pádraig as it was his enthusiasm and genius that first started them out on the road to successful musical careers. Foremost among his most distinguished pupils are fiddlers like Denis Murphy of Lisheen, Mike Duggan, Francis D O Connor and John Leary of Gneeveguilla. But undoubtedly the most famous of them all is Jerry McCarthy of Gortgloss, Scartaglen. Before immigrating to the USA, Jerry gave regular recitals of Gaelic music, ancient and modern over radio Eireann. In his second homeland in New York his music opened many doors for him in the Irish community and he was even in demand at concert halls and at wherever Irish music was played, not only in New York but throughout New England as well. He is the proud possessor of the highest accolade it is possible to win, the Oireachtas God Medal.

In spite of his international fame and may I say it, fortune, nothing pleases him more than making regular pilgrimages to his birthplace where he received a royal welcome. In recent years since returning to his native land, he is a regular contributor at the music festival held annually in Scartaglen.

In the Kerry I knew as a boy, the talent for entertainment wasn't confined to music. Every parish had its Seannachaide or storytellers and many of these could sing ballads and dance jigs and reels also. I remember one such character, one named Dave Mike Fleming of Knockbee. He was a little man in the mould of Charlie Chaplain, complete with moustache, an active wing individual. He had a fund of humorous songs and recitations. He would take the floor at weddings and parties and on his own he could render his audience helpless with laughter for an hour. He owned a small uneconomic farm and struggled all his life against grinding poverty. In spite of his problems, he managed to maintain a cheerful disposition and if he was a victim of poverty it never for a moment overcame his natural optimism and sense of comedy.

Without the help of a script writer or a back up team that many of the present day comedians can call upon, he was capable of outshining many professionals appearing nowadays on television.

In the same townland there was another Fleming, a cousin of Dave Mike who was known as Mickie Dave. Mickie had a good singing voice but it was as a concertina player that he excelled. He liked to recall the night at a wedding dance when another famous player from Farranfore pulled his concertina apart in a vain effort to keep pace with him.

Encircling that conspicuous land mark Currow Hill, lived a whole colony of the Fleming clan. The Flemings who came from Flanders, were mostly men of inches and many of them became upholders of law and order in the Dublin Metropolitan Police. In every family without exception one son was named David.

As the families in accordance with times were mostly large, it became quite a problem to identify one David Fleming from another. The method used was to refer back to their fathers and in some cases, their grandfathers, such as Davy Mike Davy, Davy Dave Davy etc. that problem has almost vanished today as many branches of the family have died out.

Over the years the family produced men of charisma and integrity. I remember Thade John and Paddy John Fleming. Thade, a giant of a man, almost seven feet tall and built accordingly, spent his youth in the Dublin Metropolitan Police. After retiring on pension from the force he bought some land in the village of Curow, built himself a two storey high

house next to the church and then married and brought up a family. He was a man of enormous strength and helped the Currow tug-o-war team to many a victory over neighbouring villages. His brother, Paddy served with the British Army in the First World War and he took part in many of the epic battles in France and Belgium and returned home at the end, whole in mind and body. Like Thade, he built himself a house near a church but in his case in Scartaglen. However, he refrained from acquiring a farm and instead he married a schoolteacher and together they produced a large family, the last whom was born after Paddy's seventieth birthday.

Another member of the Fleming clan that I recall with enormous respect and admiration was Mike Davy a first cousin to the former pair but much older in years. Mike Davy who was also a first cousin to my grandfather, Charles O'Brien, was a near neighbour of ours and the two families were close friends. With his two sons and daughter Kitty, he farmed a fairly long tract of land. His herd of dairy cattle was usually one of the highest producers of milk of all those supplying milk to Dicksgrove Creamery and consequently they were always considered to be well off, which indeed they were.

He was an old man when I first came to know him and to me as a youngster, it seemed as if he had been old since the beginning of time. His appearance accentuated his image of age. He wore a long snowy beard and walked with the aid of two sticks and for all the world looked like an Old Testament prophet. He was a man of good judgement and common sense, and very well read for a farmer. He had mastered the Bible, the old Testament and the new as well as the Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics, Aesop's Fables and many of the old Celtic romances and mythology, both Gaelic and Roman.

In his youth he must have been a fine figure of a man, for even in old age and despite walking with two sticks, he still stood over six feet tall. God had gifted him with a powerful pair of lungs and on a fine, still day it was possible to hear him engaged in an ordinary conversation at our place a half mile away! There was one occasion that I shall never forget when his powerful shout came to my rescue. I was, on this particular morning taking the milk to the creamery and as usual the horse pulled in out of the road to drink at a stream near where Mike Davy was herding his cows. On the slope out from the stream the horse slipped and fell flat on his side. There was no possibility that he would rise on his own with the weight of three tanks of milk weighing him down. While I held the horse's head down, Mike Davy commenced to hail for help toward home in Beenativaun. In less than ten minutes my elder brother, Charlie and our very good neighbour, Mike O'Sullivan arrived to the rescue on their bicycles. Very quickly they lifted the cart off the horse allowing him to rise after which he was once more harnessed between the shafts and I was once more on my way to Dicksgrove creamery. Over a gulf of more than fifty years in a corner of my memory, I can still hear Mike Davy's powerful voice wafting across the valley and I still marvel at the prompt response which it evoked. Perhaps, as they say that nothing good is ever lost in time and in eternity and we hope that even now that powerful voice is being exercised in the heavenly chorus.

One day impressed by his patriarchal appearance I remarked to him "you must have an awful lot of memories of all sorts of exciting events in your long life. Does it seem to you that you have enjoyed a very long life?"

"No indeed, no it does not. Looking back over the years only the important events stand out so, indeed."

"In your long and eventful life, what caused you the greatest amount of worry?" I asked.
"To tell you the truth, my boy, it was worrying about things that never happened. In life success is never so wonderful as it may appear in advance to the successful, nor is failure so black as it may at first appear to the disappointed. They are both hypocrites in their way".

Our friend and neighbour had a reputation, not only for good common sense, but also for an insatiable curiosity. He sat on a wooden seat on a high elevation near the gate leading to the avenue approaching his house. From there he had a clear view of his herd of cows as they grazed in the valley in front. As his seat was by the public road, he engaged all the neighbours in conversation as they passed, enquiring as to why they found it necessary to visit the village or town as the case may be. As a result he was a fountain of local news and as he was one of the few farmers to subscribe to a daily newspaper, *The Independent*, his knowledge encompassed international news as well.

There was another character from those days whose charisma and personality I can vividly recall across the years. He was also a member of the Fleming clan, one Michael Pats Fleming, generally referred to as Mick Pats. A man of considerable presence. When he entered a room he commanded immediate attention, standing up to six feet and erect as a Prussian general, one was left with the impression of an aristocrat removed from his natural environment.

With a slim athletic body and classical features in the mould of Sir Anthony Eden and his unnerving sense of timing with an appropriate epigram, I am convinced that he would have made a wonderful actor. With his sister Babe he lived in a solidly constructed farmhouse at the lower end of Knockane. Despite having only a small farm they were considered as well to do, as Mick had a pension as a one-time rate collector, which made all the difference between poverty and passing affluence.

There were a number of proverbs which he occasionally quoted with studied dramatic poise when he wanted to clinch an argument or put an upstart in his proper place;
"It is a long road that has no turning". "What is life to any man when no one speaks his name?". "There is a time and a place for everything and everything in its time and place".
"As a man sows, so shall he reap". There are many others but these are the best remembered.

As a farmer Mick was totally miscast. By nature he was a gregarious individual and more of a city man by instinct and if fate in the shape of the sudden death of his brother Paddy who was meant to inherit the farm had not intervened, he would most likely have emigrated and joined the police force in Britain as did his other brother, David.

My grandmother used to relate that during the great influenza epidemic following the Great War, a young woman in Knockbee of the name of O Rourke died of the disease and the neighbours were so scared of catching the dreaded flu that nobody would enter the cabin and coffin the young lady or in any way help the family to bury the deceased. When Mick Pats heard of their plight he hastened to their aid. Securing a coffin he entered the humble home boldly, placing the body in the coffin he took charge of events and saw to it that the young girl had a decent Christian burial. As ever luck favours the brave and during the time the epidemic lasted he never fell victim to it.

It is an amazing fact that so many people of that generation remained single and very often it had nothing to do with economic factors and Mick and Babe remained unmarried all their

lives. Mick survived Babe by many years, living to be almost ninety. They both sleep peacefully in Killentierna new cemetery and the old farmhouse has been demolished, mores the pity.

That farmhouse like the one our family occupied, was one of may built by a grant from the British government. They were solidly constructed with walls of up to two feet wide of stone and mortar. The type most commonly seen were not quite two storeys high, more of the chalet bungalow sort, that is they were long and low having just two rooms with sloping rafters on the first floor. The kitchen which was also the living room was the largest room in the house. This had a concrete floor which turned up useful for the occasional celebratory dance for weddings, Biddy dances, thrashing or harvest festival ceilidghes.

Another such occasion was the Stations Party. The stations, as they were called were events of major importance. They took place twice a year, in the Spring months and again in the Autumn. In those two seasons the parish clergy visited a house in each townland, hearing confessions and celebrating mass. A representative from each home attended and after mass a very good breakfast was laid on making the stations one of the best loved social functions. It was usual for the party to be resumed in the evening when the young people were encouraged to dance and sing late into the night.

The music which consisted of a duo with a fiddle and accordion was provided by local musicians of which there was always an abundance. Biddy nights as they were called were arranged for a suitable night toward the end of February. The money to pay for the fare at these gatherings was raised by teams of local boys and sometimes girls, going from house to house on the feast of St. Brigid on the 1st of February. Hence the name Biddy, but what St. Brigid had to do with collecting money for a gathering, no one knows. The Biddy boys were always in disguise, each one wearing a mask and dressed in an old raincoat and battered old hat. They were accompanied by a musician with a concertina or an accordion which provided the music for a dance, usually a jig or a polka and a member of the troupe would sing a few verses of a ballad if asked.

Before departing the man of the house made a contribution of a half crown or so for which he was thanked by the teams captain after which the Biddy boys would leave uttering their thanks with wishes for prosperity and good luck toward all the household. It was a time honoured custom and an occasion for much jollity. Like many old customs it has now almost disappeared in the new more affluent climate.

Going in the Wren, which was once a regular occurrence on St. Stephen's Day, which falls on the 26th December, has also fallen victim to the changing life style. The ritual in which a Wren was killed and taken on a stick held aloft and decorated with holly and ivy and coloured bunting, headed a procession of youths dressed in gay and colourful attire and wearing masks, tramped along the road from house to house to collect money to bury the Wren.

They were a gay and noisy group with such musical instruments as a fiddle, a tin whistle or a melodeon. They used to visit each house on the way chanting "the Wren, the wren, the king of all birds, St. Stephen's Day, he was caught in the furze. Up with the kettle and down with the pan, a penny or two to bury the Wren".

The ritual goes back thousands of years to the time of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr at whose stoning to death St. Paul, it seems witnessed and approved. Legend has it that St. Stephen was being chased by the Jews and hid in an ivy-covered tree. But as the pursuers passed, a wren flew out and attracted attention to Stephen leading to his execution and death.

In the twentieth century, killing the wren had given way to using an effigy of the bird and no cruelty to one of God's creatures was involved in this innocent sport.

At the end of the day when the cash box was full and the feet began to ache, the troupe would call it a day. They would sojourn to a friendly house, count their takings and make arrangements to hold a supper dance in the near future.

Any householder who refused to contribute to the Wren boys was branded a miserly scrooge, "sure, that person is so mean, that they wouldn't even give a copper to a starving beggar, never mind to the Wren Boys".

The feast of St. John the Baptist on the 24th of June was a day of particular significance in my youth. The ancient people revered this day because it ushered in high summer. At this time the dairy herds were producing milk at the highest level of the season, as the grass grew plentiful and lush. The cornfields were well advanced and the meadows were ready for the cutting and saving of the hay crop. When the weather was fine it was a time of great activity on the land. As the harvesting weather was usually unpredictable the country folk were acutely aware of how dependent they were on Providence for a successful harvest.

Although not really so, St. John's Day on 24th of June was celebrated as Mid Summers' Day. On St. John's Eve, bonfires were lit in the evening after work and whole families gathered round the fires and songs were sung and stories told until at last daylight died on the longest day of the year and the revellers wandered their way homeward.

It was the custom in Kerry, as it was indeed throughout the western world, to celebrate the important annual feasts by using the local produce in season at the time. Easter was celebrated in the homes with a feast of eggs and egg products, as these were cheap and plentiful when the greatest of the Christian church celebrations took place.

And so it was that after the harvest was secure in the barns, the potato and the root crops had been pitted, the next festival was that of Halloween on the night between 31st of October and 1st November. At this time "the mossed cottage apple tree was bent with apples". So it was with this fruit Halloween was celebrated. However it was more popularly known in Kerry as snap-apples-night. In some homes an apple was suspended from the ceiling with long cord and each member of the family had to try and catch the apple in his or her mouth with both hands tied behind their back. Another method more commonly used was to fill a tub with water which was placed in the middle of the kitchen floor, then some apples were floated on top and again without the use of hands each person had to try and catch an apple with ones teeth and the successful contestants were allowed to keep the apples as prizes.

After the games there was of course tea and cake and naturally apple-pie served and one and all had an enjoyable time.

Notwithstanding the games, Halloween had a more serious side as it ushered in November, the month of the "holy souls", when the souls of departed relatives and friends were

remembered in a special way in family prayers and in having the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered up on their behalf.

The two great Christian festivals of the year were always celebrated with religious favours, that is at Christmas and Easter. Each feast day was preceded by a strict day of fasting and abstinence and to prepare for the great occasion almost everybody went to confession in advance. While the religious significance took priority, this in no way lessened the enthusiasm to enjoy to the full the good things that God had provided in the way of eating and drinking. They had got their priorities right and for the most part they lived happy uncomplicated lives. The traditional Christmas dinner of roast goose was eaten in the afternoon of Christmas Day. Served up with the goose were peas or mashed swedes with roast or boiled potatoes and stuffing all laced with rich gravy. Only after the war in the forties did turkey begin to become more popular than the goose. Having wine or beer on the table was practically unknown, as people seemed to enjoy food and drink separately.

During the depression in the 1930s, there was a good deal of poverty in both town and country throughout Kerry and there were many families who were unable to afford meat of any description. Many children suffered from malnutrition resulting in tuberculosis and rickets. The staple diet consisted of bread and milk, potatoes with cabbage or in winter swedes.

Most farmers fattened a pig, which was killed and cured for bacon. The killing and the curing of bacon was always carried out in the premises and the day the pig was slaughtered was an occasion for much excitement. In every district there was a man of strong nerves and some semi-professional expertise who was willing to give his services free in the interest of good neighbourliness and travel around the area to kill and cure the bacon.

After the butchering of the pig, the carcase was hung for 24 hours before being cut into flitches and cured. The curing consisted of rubbing salt vigorously by hand into each flitch for at least half an hour. The meat was then placed in a large wooden barrel in pickle which was rendered airtight and left to cure for six or seven weeks.

When the bacon was cured it was taken out of the barrel and hung from the rafters in the kitchen. The night on which the meat was salted was as a rule another social occasion. While the work went ahead there was much jolling and exchanging of jokes and stories as well as discussing the local news.

While the menfolk were engaged in saving the bacon the women were involved in filling the puddings. It was the custom that when the work was finished the evening concluded with tea and a very generous fry-up. As the neighbours, both men and women helped on such occasions, it was common for up to a dozen people to sit around the kitchen table and enjoy the feast as a reward for their labours.

At this late night supper of rashers and both black and white sausages and home baked bread were consumed, there was an air of jollity with many a funny anecdote being told and any local news or coming events of importance were discussed.

As a centre piece there was always a good ghost story to be told. There is something in the nature of the 'mystic celt' that is highly responsive to tales of the supernatural. Tales of banshees, witches and haunted houses were recited with becoming solemnity. The banshee or fairy woman's cry was supposed to foretell the death of some members of important

families. It was always considered to be a bad omen when the banshees' lament echoed across the countryside after dark. In modern times she would be labelled class conscious as she only lamented the passing of members of feudal prince's families and those of the Norman aristocracy. In actual fact scions of the old feudal chieftains families are still to be found in abundance in clans such as the McCarthys, O Donoghues, O Sullivans, O Briens and hosts of others throughout the county. But in this materialistic age it is problematic as to whether she would bother to shed a tear for these families now that they have lost their lands and political influence.

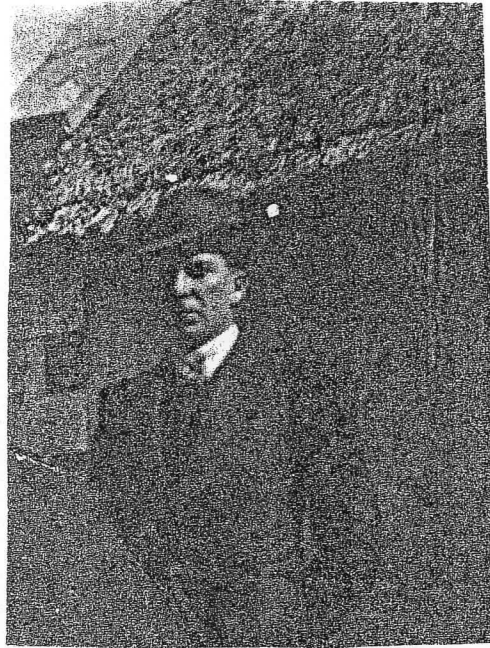
There were numerous tales also of priests on the way late at night to administer the Last Sacraments to known sinners, being held up by the evil spirits in various but terrifying disguises.

In the first half of the twentieth century superstition still played a significant part in the lives of country folk. Many people still believed in the evil powers of charms and witchcraft even if they would never dream of becoming involved. The fear of the power of darkness was perhaps a sign of paganism and the Druidic religion which preceded Christianity in Ireland. The Gaelic word commonly used in Kerry for superstition was *Piseógs*.

There were certain days in the calendar in which these alleged supernatural forces were most active and one of these was May Day. I remember my grandmother telling me that on May Day morning when her mother who lived in Ballygree near Casleisland went to the well for water she surprised the wife of one of the neighbours skimming the well with a skimming. The skimming was a tool which was used in every dairy throughout the land to skim the cream off the top of the milk which was laid out in large pans on the dairy floor.

The theory behind the skimming of the well was that if one arose before sun-up on May morning and removed the top of your neighbours well water that in so doing the neighbours good luck for the year was taken and used for the benefit of the remover. I don't think that my grandmother, Katie Hussey believed in 'Piseógs' as she seemed to think that the actions of their misguided neighbour did their good fortune no material damage. Nevertheless, there were some families who lived in fear of the power of witchcraft. Every animal that was lost, be it cow, calf, horse or pig was put down to the ill will and greed of some grasping evil minded neighbour. Significantly enough, those who most feared this force were always badly off and invariably were the victims of bad luck or misfortune. The moral of this, if there is a moral, seems to be that, if you don't believe in superstition but instead have a strong Christian faith, then evil cannot control your life, nor even remotely affect your material possessions.

**William O' Brien
Beenativaune
Currow
Killarney
Co Kerry
Ireland**



Born 1910

He contracted polio at a young age and walked with a limp all his life. As a child he went to the local school in Currow Village on a donkey's back, being unable to walk the three miles.

He emigrated to London where he worked in the Post Office and married Margareta from Austria. They had no children. He died of cancer in 1994.