

# Early Memories of Redwood School

SEAMUS J. KING

As far as I know I went to school for the first time in 1942. I was four years old in August of that year and it was only logical that I should get my first introduction a month later when the schools opened after the summer holidays. My sister, Maura, two years older, was already there and my mother was teaching infants, first and second classes in the two-teacher school at Redwood, Co. Tipperary.

The school was new, built by W. C. Martin, Portumna in 1939-40 and occupied for the first time in September of the latter year. The principal was Miss Margaret McCormack, who had taught in the old school, which was located about a quarter mile away in the direction of Redwood Castle. In fact, Miss McCormack purchased the old school in August 1940 as her residence.

Born in Ballymacegan, Lorrha, Co. Tipperary the school was four miles away, whether one turned left outside our gate and went via Redwood or took a right turn and went via Grange and Ballinacor. The alternative was to go across the fields by which route the journey was about two and a half miles.

## PETROL RATIONING

My mother had a car, but rationing had come in in June 1942 and petrol was available only to people engaged in essential services and even for them the allowance was miserly. And teaching wasn't regarded as an essential service. My mother would have normally cycled to school but with Maura, and now me, travelling across the fields, she came along to take care of us.

That journey was a very pleasant one in the summertime. It was by a long-established Mass path that stretched from Ballymacegan to Redwood Chapel. It commenced closer to the River Shannon at Paddy Hough's house over a mile into Wellington's farm.



*Redwood School. Source: Author's Private Collection.*

There were seven children in the Hough family, and they used the same path to go to Mass and school. Paddy was a great man to forecast the weather for the day, better than the Radio Eireann Met report. If he carried the coat on the carrier of the bike, it was certain to rain.

We joined the Mass path a couple of hundred yards from our house and it went across seven different fields until it reached the road, where the church and school were located side by side. Along the way we went through gates, across small bridges and climbed over stiles. We crossed a small stream in one place in which the water flowed clearly over a gravel bed. It was a favourite stopping place for a cold drink as we made our way

home on sunny afternoons. We lay on our bellies and lapped the water like dogs or cattle. Further along the way as we crossed a stile from Glennon's field into Kenny's, we stepped on a Mass rock. This was a large granite rock, probably a couple of ton weight with a recognisable cross carved on it. It remained there until the 1980s, when Fr. Martin Ryan, P.P. had it removed to a new location beside the altar in the church. The removal was carried out, according to him, to preserve it from the elements and to make it more visible to the congregation.

As we went through the last of the fields, we could see the Kenny mansion on the right hand side. It was a house of many parts with a lot of valleys linking the parts

together. Rumour said it was a damp house. For us it had one great asset, a bamboo grove, from which we cut our fishing rods. It also had a fine garden, where my mother used to get gooseberries and blackcurrants for making jam. The garden also had a glass house where tomatoes were grown, a fruit that generally wasn't part of the ordinary fare at the time. Victor Kenny and his wife had two daughters, who were good horsewomen. One of them caused a bit of sensation one Sunday morning when she rode past the church in full regalia as the congregation came out of Mass.

### TRAVELLING BY ASS & CART

As I grew older, I remember racing home after school at 3 o'clock in summertime and never stopping until I got there. In wintertime it was a different experience as the fields were wet, cart tracks had to be traversed and overflowing streams walked through. And this was the time before the advent of rubber boots, or Wellingtons as they were then known. Our best footwear was untreated leather boots that let in the water and left us with wet feet. I remember Tilly Nevin, a woman who used to work for us, drying out the boots by the fire in the evenings and putting creosote or some blacking liquid on the leather in order to try to seal them.

One winter, it must have been 1947, the fields were so wet as to be impassable. An alternative way of getting us to school had to be found. The cars were still off the road, so we borrowed an ass and cart and we – my sisters Maura and Marjorie, and myself – travelled in style to school for a couple of months!

Now, the ass was a disaster. My father

would give him a few belts of a stick as we set off in order to frighten him along the way but as soon as we were gone a few hundred yards he forgot about the beating and reverted to his slow pace. We got one bit of relief on this painful journey. If we were lucky that our journey coincided with that of Johnny Nevin at Grange Cross, as he travelled to work at Watters of Ballinacor, we got some relief. Whatever Johnny shouted at the ass, he used to take off like the hammers of hell as if the sound of his voice exposed some primeval fear. But, as soon as Johnny left us the ass reverted to his tortoise pace. I remember one evening trying the gee him up on the way home and getting down on the shaft of the car to give him a few kicks in the stomach, and tearing my trousers in the process, but I might as well be kicking a wall.

Anyway, we eventually got to the school and having let off my two sisters I drove down the road to Jim Sammon's house and untacked the ass for the day there. I was allowed to leave the school at 2.45 pm to tackle him and have him ready for the journey home. When I think back I wonder how long did the journey take but I suppose none of us was in a great hurry at that time.

### LOCATION OF SCHOOL

Redwood school had been built in 1939-40 and it replaced one that had only been built in the 1920s, which itself had replaced an earlier one at Redwood Castle.



Map of Lorrha Parish. With kind permission of James Heenan.

It was a two-teacher, mixed, school built in the style of so many of them at the time, three big windows in the front of each room, flooding the place with light and air. It was located about 100 metres from Redwood Chapel, which also had equally big windows. Whoever designed and located the school gave little consideration to the popular game in the area, hurling. From the time it opened, the game of hurling was banned because of the fear of breaking windows. The game that was played was called Peg ball, a game I never heard of since. Instead of using hurleys to hit it, the ball was pegged or thrown to

one another, and the game was played as a hurling game might with goalies, backs and forwards. The ball itself was a makeshift thing made out of cloth and sewn together into a ball-sized object. We had matches every day of great intensity and a final on the last day of term. There was no reward except bragging rights for winning but we always wanted to win. I lost one final and, as the winning captain roared down the field in jubilation after the call to come in, I couldn't take it, ran after him and tripped him. He got up bawling, ran in and told the teacher, and I got four of the best. But it was worth it! Well: at the time!

## DESCRIPTION

The rooms were big and airy, looking out onto sunny days. But they could be cold in the winter. The only heating was a small fire grate in one corner, near which was the teacher's desk. We all had to bring sods of turf to school to keep the fire going. On really cold mornings the teacher would bring up three or four of the children at a time and have them warm their hands in the front of the fire even though it was small and gave out little heat. There was no electricity in the school, so it wasn't possible to plug an electric fire into a power supply. There were cloakrooms for coats etc but the toilets, which were dry closets, were down the yard. There was no such thing as toilet paper and the closets were shovelled out during the summer. My sister recalls that at a certain time of the year the closets crawled with worms, and she was scared they would climb up to greet her as she completed her toilet actions. The girls' cloakrooms, toilets and yard were separate, and the boys and girls had no contact with each other outside of the classroom.

The school yard was concreted but the builders must have skimmed on the cement because already it had cracked and ravelled and was covered in small stones and bits of concrete, quite dangerous if you fell on it. At the bottom of the yard was an open shed, which provided the minimum protection from rain or shelter from cold.

It was in this shed that I had my first real fight during my later years in the school. I can't remember what started it, but I remember standing up and facing my opponent quite confident of putting him away. However, before I was well into

position, I got the belt of a fist on each side of the face and was flummoxed. I pulled back but was egged on by the boys and rushed in for revenge. As I did, I got two more smackers, one on each side of the face again, which put an end to my enthusiasm, and I conceded defeat with a bruised face and a greatly injured ego.

## TEACHERS

Corporal punishment was the accepted form of punishment. I got no special treatment from my mother. I often thought that she was more severe on me than the other children. Perhaps it was for my good, but I believe that she had a fear she might be accused of being partial to her own and was stricter with us.

Later, when I got to third class, I went to the next room to Miss McCormack, who came from County Roscommon. She was unmarried and lived nearby with her sister, Agnes, also unmarried. Miss McCormack was always in poor health and missed many days through illness. In fact, she had to retire early because she had used up all her sick days. She suffered from a severe case of bronchitis and used to come to school all wrapped up, particularly in winter. One of her usual protections against the cold was a sheet of brown paper covering her chest inside her coat. She was always coughing and sometimes went into spasms in trying to get up phlegm, which she collected into rags rather than dainty hankies. And, of course she was always cross as a result. Her one good point was the lovely cocoa she made for us at lunchtime during winter.

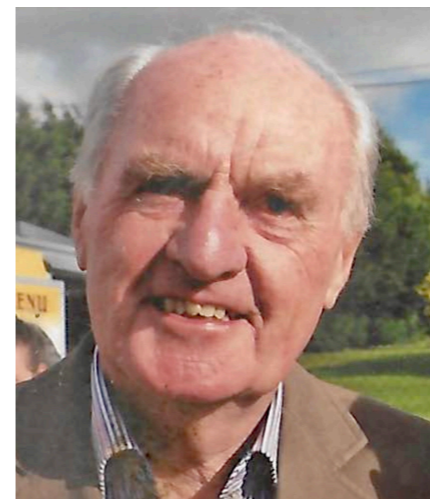
We had substitute teachers regularly and one of the most frequent was a Miss Quinn from County Down. Her Irish was very

poor, and the classes suffered as a result. We all had to do the Primary Certificate at the end of sixth class, when we were examined in Irish, English and Maths. I recall getting the full 200 marks in Maths but only 80 in Irish. When I went to St. Flannan's College, Ennis for secondary school, I was at a disadvantage as many of the classes were taught in Irish.

At the time few children went to secondary school. Many of those who did went boarding as I did to St. Flannan's, which was the Diocesan College for Killaloe, the diocese we were in. The girls went to convent boarding schools. My sister, Maura, went to the Sisters of Mercy in Loughrea. There was no day-secondary school nearby. There were Vocational Schools in Portumna, Birr and Borrisokane and some children went to these.

## OTHER MEMORIES

Was I happy at Primary School? I don't really remember. I think most of us put up with the experience as part of growing up like working on the farm or doing chores around the house. There was little change in the yearly routine. I remember we all got injections at some stage. We were prepared



### ABOUT SEAMUS J. KING

Following secondary school, Seamus J. King studied for a B.A. in English and History at UCC and did a Higher Diploma in Education at UCD. He then spent four years abroad, in the U.K., Germany and the USA, before returning to teach at Rockwell College for thirty-six years. He has written numerous books on G.A.A., matters and contributed articles on sport and local history to magazines.

for First Communion and Confirmation. For the latter we were confirmed by Dr. Fogarty, the oldest bishop ever in the Irish Episcopate at 51 years, who made this confirmation in the parish in 1951 his final one as a bishop because of his friendship with Canon Molony, P.P.

Confirmation was a big occasion, taking place every three years, and it stretched over two days. On day one the candidates were examined in their catechism by the Bishop if you were one of the bright ones, and by the Diocesan Examiner if you were less so. It was an expensive time for the parents, especially of girls, who had to have two outfits, a coat and hat for the examination and a white dress and veil for the confirmation.

During Lent we went up to the Church every day for the Stations of the Cross. At another time we were screened for T.B. A photographer came for a day and took all our photographs. Most of us got trained to be altar boys to serve Mass at 9.30 am on Sundays in the church nearby. And the priest used to visit us once a week and check our catechism. These were little changes in a fixed, unchanging, school routine.