

Letter from . . . Dublin

A Memory of Micheál MacLiammóir (1899-1978)

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"Or what worse evil come
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath"
W B Yeats

In July 1976, aboard the *Saint Patrick* bound for Le Havre from Rosslare, I awaited my turn in a long queue to a small hatch from which a sullen girl served a murky fluid, coffee. Suddenly, my spirits lifted on hearing an unmistakable rich voice proclaim—"Hilton, do you mean to say that they are unable to separate the milk from the tea on this damnable tub?" And there, standing with a dripping paper cup held aloft, was Micheál, looking bereft and very much out of place in this crowded eating hole. Placated eventually by Hilton, he sat alone at a small table smoking and gazing wistfully towards the sea. I introduced myself, and, although it was some years since we had last briefly met, he welcomed me warmly to his table.

Of the *Saint Patrick* he understandably had little good to say—"My dear boy, it is, I imagine, the closest one can come to a floating Belsen. It is unspeakable—one cannot travel like a gentleman any more. A young woman attempted to oust me from my cabin at 9 o'clock, but I stuck fast—how awful."

Television addicts

When I recalled meeting him in Harcourt Terrace when I was a boy, he expressed joy at my childhood remembrance. But he was, as he went on to explain, glad to have left home tem-

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porarily—"You see, my partner and I have suffered so much there recently. Poor Hilton was in one room absolutely racked with pain. He has arthritis of the most painful variety and, furthermore, his obsession with the wretched television set resulted in excessive devotion to tennis, and he developed—to add to his other afflictions—tennis elbow while watching Wimbledon."

Warming to the topic of television, he went on:

"I must tell you a story. I was in a play, many years ago, in London. What it was I cannot remember. I was staying in an hotel at Lancaster Gate. Such was the design of the place that, on my way in and out, I had to traverse the lounge wherein nestled the television set. Every day, no matter what the hour, there sat in front of the set a young girl gazing at the machine with a look that could only be described as idolatrous. Eventually, after three weeks, I could stand it no longer. I marched up to her and said—'My child, do you never go to the park to play with the other boys and girls?'

"She, without taking her eyes off the set, and barely opening her mouth replied in Cockney, 'Don't like boys and girls.' 'Well, my child, do you not ever take the dog for a walk?' 'Ate dogs, I do.' 'Dear, dear, don't you ever take the cat for a walk?' 'Simply 'ate cats completely, I do.' 'Dear, dear, my child, don't you ever read Hans Christian Andersen?' 'Oos ee?' 'He writes fairy tales, my child.'

"For the first time, she lifts her eyes from the television and looks at me as though I had come from another planet. 'O Gawd, don't be spoofy.'

"Well, my boy, I said to myself, God help us if this is what we can expect from the future generation. And another thing television has done is to destroy manners. I was in the Yellow Rooms in Rathfarnham recently with an acquaintance, and, in passing a gentleman—we may at least call him that for the moment—who was standing at the bar with his pint clutched in his large hand, I unwittingly knocked his elbow and said: 'My good fellow, I am so sorry.' To which he replied, without moving, 'so you fucking well might be.' Lucky I was not to get my eye blackened, because he was quite a big fellow. Oh dear me, television has destroyed manners, utterly destroyed manners—how terrible."

Many parts

I expressed my doubts about the effects of television on children, and this led Micheál to his own childhood. "I attended what is known as a boarding school in England for one-and-a-half years, during which time I learnt endurance and the rudiments of arithmetic. I then went on the stage at the age of 10 years, and was educated thereafter by my sister, who had a certificate for teaching. She used to teach me—I remember it so well—from a silky covered purple book. She took me from

Chaucer to the Elizabethans, and, of course, to the greatest Elizabethan of all, and then through to contemporary authors—how I loved it. You see, my boy, keeping the hours that I did in the acting profession, regular education was out of the question. My father, of course, wanted me to take a business career—he later sent me to Spain to acquire Spanish for this pursuit, which I did.”

“Happily, you did not pursue this vocation,” said I.

“Yes, happily for business.”

Continuing his childhood reminiscences, Micheál went on, “I remember earning fifteen shillings a week when I started, and then, because I was good, I was given a leading part—it was, I think, in *The Goldfish Bowl*—and this brought in the large sum of £2 a week. My mother thought we were millionaires. But, dear me, I did not really know what I wanted to be, which was quite in contrast to another little 10-year-old who was playing with me—he knew exactly what he wanted to be, even at that age. ‘An actor, Michael, an actor I shall be’—the cheek of the little pup, he was like that always even in later life, dear Noel Coward. Then I played in *Macbeth*. I was the apparition and Duncan’s child. I had, of course, to be killed, and it was funny when as the apparition wearing a silken veil, and with my throat gashed, the veil caught fire at the cauldron and had to be quenched by the witches. Ha, Ha! Those were the times.”

I declined a cigarette, pointing out with some regret that I had given them up. “Yes, you lose something, and I suppose you gain something. Smoking is a peculiar habit. It is not really a pleasure other than in a negative sense. Colette, that superb creature, put it so well; she said, smoking really minimises discomfort—if you are bored and smoke, you become a little less bored; if you are nervous and tense, you become a little less nervous and tense; if you are in pain, your pain is lessened. Don’t you think that is the essence of smoking?”

He went on to discuss Colette. “Oh, how I would love to have met her. I adored her. She was, of course, old when she died—in her 80s, I think. The world waited for Jean Cocteau, her great friend, to speak and satisfy its morbid curiosity about Colette. But, he was so shaken, so upset, and so honourable—he was, as you know, queer, and she, the darling, was everything—that all he could say was: ‘We loved as brother and sister, as man and woman, she was my dearest friend.’ Don’t you think that is beautiful, truly beautiful?”

A little later we reached Le Havre, and I waved goodbye to Micheál and his travelling companions as they set off on their Continental Odyssey. I went on to Paris, haunted by a memory, his words ringing in my mind. No wonder he was so fascinated by Wilde—they were so alike in many ways. Unique artists with a common background—Dublin. May they enjoy pleasant converse in the Elysian fields.