

Carnlough to the Falls Road

Uncle Owen was born in the Glenside Carnlough.

His Father and Mother were William and Annie (nee McAuley of Waterfoot)

He had 7 siblings – 3 brothers and 4 sisters.

William Joseph (Joe) Phelim Thomas Hugh, Mary, Peggy (died as young girl) Annie and Roisin.

The picture here is of Him and Thomas (my father) at Haymaking time.

He was a typical farm boy born and reared on the side of a mountain with spectacular views out over the lands of Drumnasole and the Irish Sea.

His Grand father was Captain Willie O’Kane (picture of his ship. His Mother had an Uncle Canon Thomas Hugh McAuley. He was the oldest Parish priest in Ireland at the time of his death aged 97yrs.

The young Owen was influenced by him in his decision to become a priest. It was however the exposure to the Columban Fathers at St. Malachy’s college in Belfast which left him in no doubt that being a Missionary priest was his calling.

Strangely enough the Parish Owen attended in Carnlough is called St. John’s and Owen in English is John and the Patron Saint of Priests is called St. John.

So perhaps long before he knew he wanted to be a Priest..
It was a line he was destined to walk.

On 21st December 1944 he was Ordained here at Dalgan park to become a Missionary to China. His ministry was delayed until 1946 due to WW2.

Fr Pat Colgan has kindly agreed to read from Uncle Owens account of his Arrest and subsequent imprisonment by the Communists in China.

If we were to think about things which we could relate to Owen as a Man. These are a few I can think of:

Black Tea or Coffee and a Cigarette
Gardening and Sheepdogs
A big Black Bicycle and a Rolling Stone.

All who knew Owen, knew he enjoyed his Cup of the black stuff and his cigarettes. In fact during his final journey to Hong Kong after his release he managed to buy cigarettes.

He had a love of Gardening and training Sheepdogs. Winning many a fiercely battled Sheepdog trial in the Glens

He had 5 gardens at home in the Glenside and was very good at scowling if he returned home and no one had maintained them as he'd instructed.

This was a man who liked to feel the soil beneath his feet, to turn the sod and to witness new life which would feed and nourish the body and the mind in the process.

I've no doubt that in the years following his release from China that he cherished the freedom of the outdoors that Gardening and farming granted him.

He built a garden in Ballymun and indeed we have a quote here from a parishioner who remembers her daddy helping him out in it. ~~They even got a Jack Russell pup from him which they named Kane.~~

We will hear from both Fr. Donie and some of Owen's parishioners who were with him in Ballymun at its inception.

The Bicycle.. there's a story about how he 'hoicked' the bicycle up the flights of stairs to his flat in Balcurris Road for safe keeping.

It's possible that folks might have thought he was rather possessive of his Bicycle but then they wouldn't have known the story behind it.

Uncle Owen called the people of home the Neighbours in one of his articles in the Far East and he thanked them for providing him with the means to build the Church, School and Dispensary in China.

Those neighbours throughout his years as a Missionary priest provided him with more than just the financial support he required.

When he was ordained they presented him with a solid gold pocket watch which is inscribed. This watch was very precious to him and indeed when he was asked to identify his belongings a couple of days prior to his release (Actually 23rd November – St. Columba's Day) He let them know that his watch was missing and he was insistent that it would be returned to him before his departure.

I find this quite astonishing. How many of us having suffered 18months in a Communist prison would have the strength to make demands on the Chinese.

It is without a doubt another example of his defiance towards them.

And so, back to the Bicycle. This was another present which the Parishioners gave to him. Only this time it was waiting for his arrival in B.A. South America where he was to be the first Director of the new Columban Pro Region, after a two year recovery period at home.

This Bicycle can be seen in the picture with Fr. McFadden. When putting together what little items we could find for the exhibition we made an exciting observation. The bicycle which he had used in Ballymun and indeed the Fall's road in Belfast was the bicycle which he had been gifted. Indeed it makes sense. There is no way he would have left behind something they gave him and he was way to 'stingy' to do so. This 'bicycle was also an important way in which he could get around his parishioners in Lima.

Lima was a tough ministry for him in that he was a Glensman where at some point most days it seems, that it rains. It could go for years there without rain and the dust he found penetrated everywhere. However the work he undertook there was most important at a time when the people of the slums in Lima who had left their homes in the Andes needed all the help they could get to establish themselves in the area known as the Pampas.

The last but no doubt the most important gift his neighbours gave him was their prayers. He knew that they would be praying for him and indeed it was only when he got home that he knew that every man woman and child in the parish had been praying for his safe return home.

A Rolling Stone

It's well known that a rolling stone gathers no moss. And in Uncle Owens case I think we can safely say he gathered no Moss.

His Missions took him over 3 continents where he encountered and assisted thousands of people. They had little in the way of possessions and then again neither did he. I vividly remember my mother's presents to him at Christmas would be black socks and Jumpers as the ones he had were darned.

Anything he possessed had either a Sentimental value or were of a practical use. Again the people of Ballymun recall how 'He had nothing, he gave it all away.

There are a couple of good examples of his frugal lifestyle

Fr. Peter Owen who spent four and half years with him in St. Pauls (and who kindly spoke of his time with him at his funeral and both our exhibitions). He tells of how he called to see him in his room at St. Pauls and there he was sat in a battered armchair, wearing a threadbare black coat, reading Guardini's 'The Lord' in Spanish.

On the occasion of his Golden Anniversary his sister Annie decided he could do with a new chair and this duly arrived at the house. Well Owen being Owen was furious and insisted that they take it back to the shop. The one he had was sufficient for his needs.

A similar story could be told about the garden fork he gave his nephew to get repaired and in his infinite wisdom Martin decided it was time for a new one. Once again he got a short shrift and told to take it back and that he'd get the old one repaired himself. That garden fork is still in Martin's possession along with the other tools

he used in his garden at the Glenside. The box on display has the soil and vegetable from his last remaining garden.

Isn't it wonderful how circumstances come about sometimes. In this instance, I was speaking with a lady from Carnlough who works in a residential home. I was asking her about people of the village who might still remember Uncle Owen. I got a lovely surprise to hear of a 92yr old lady who not only remembered him, but who had Penpal letters from him. Mary's letters are on display in the file. But there is one particularly important letter. It's dated 1946 and is written in minute writing with a huge amount of detail. It took me 2 hrs to decipher.

Thankfully as we say in the Glens.. She'd had the Gumption to keep them. I will shortly read part of this letter and I hope you can get a sense of the mischievous young man he was when he went out to China.

This also evident in the story he wrote for the Far East regarding a Middle of the night trek to visit a dying woman. From misbehaving, whilst going up river in a boat with a Pagan couple. To his slow journey, up into the country, being guided by two elderly men who were intent on getting to and returning from the destination intact.

A New Record In the words of Fr Owen.

'I have walked in processions at funerals and in liturgical ceremonies, where the pace is normally a slow one.

I have walked to the faltering steps of aged men and young children learning to toddle.

But never before had I walked, nor do I believe anyone else ever walked

In such a slow procession as that night... from the church to the house of the sick woman.

We know he arrived home via Dublin and Dalgan Park. He had been met by several family members in Dublin.

I'm sure he was overwhelmed by the reception he got as the roads of Carnlough and his neighbouring village Glenarm (where he stopped off to visit his Aunt Annie) were lined with people clapping and cheering and the banner on the Arch saying Cead Mile Failte.

Mary can recount this day vividly and said 'I thought I'd drop dead with excitement. It was wonderful and I'll never forget that night as long as I live'. It was amazing to see her relive that day 70yrs later. And a special thanks to Fr. Donie for coming with me to visit Mary. She was honoured and delighted.

Letter from China

Arrest: Fr Pat Colgan

Uncle Owens poem

Ballymun: Fr. Donie & Friends Corner stone story

The Vestments story

Falls Road St.Paul's

You've heard so much about his journey but all journeys must end somewhere.. Uncle Owen thought his days would be spent in a quiet country parish after all his 'escapades' and for a while this seemed to be the case. However this was not to be.

Albeit he was sent to Portrush on the north coast, where the biggest events of the year are the NW200 motorcycle races and the Open Golf. But this was short lived. And he was asked to do a short term swop with a priest from St. Paul's on the Falls Road.

Now this was at the height of the troubles and the area of the Parish he was responsible for was called the Clonard District. It runs alongside the infamous Shankill Road. His short swop somehow lasted 17yrs and during this time he got to know the people of the Falls and they him... in as much as his Kindness, humility and ability to provide them with the support they needed. Some were aware of his background and when we held the exhibition in the Fr. Owen O'Kane centre in January I was truly 'blown away' by their obvious admiration and love for him.

Fr. Peter Owens spoke of him and told us that he was one of two lay people he knew who he felt was worthy of a Sainthood. This didn't mean he was a 'Saint' in everyday terms. Anyone who knew him would most likely have encountered at some point a man who could be stubborn.. Thran as we say at home... and cross if it was something which annoyed him enough.

I think we could ask ourselves .. What did it take to keep him sane during his time in prison?

I think the answer lies in both his Faith and his strength of character.

As Fr. Peter said.. here was a Man who loved being at home in the Glens, Working the land, yet he chose to spend his entire life (way past the retirement years of most) in cities.. Attending the Laity in his quiet humble way. Giving everything he had and expecting nothing in return.

St. Columban said ' A life unlike your own can be your best Teacher'

I think we can safely say that Uncle Owen lived a life very unlike that of his siblings. It has been an honour to recount what we know of his life through the exhibitions and storytelling which has happened on this journey. And I'm proud to say he was my Uncle.

I like to thank everyone who contributed in any way to the success of his story being told and to you all at Dalgan Park for everything you did to help make his end of life care more comfortable. He is buried in Calvary Cemetery nestled under the Carnlough hills.

As a token of our appreciation I would like to present this Cheque for 1200 Euro it was raised at the two exhibitions in Carnlough to the Falls Road.

Green Glens of Antrim
