

George Wallace – Writing about Growing up in Ireland*

Victoria, July 1991

Showing slides of my sculptures and pictures and talking about my early life to an audience at the Art Centre in Guelph this past April, I said that I felt very fortunate to have grown up in Ireland and went on to tell how in the mid '60s there were four Americans, all in their late twenties, teaching in the Fine Art Department at McMaster.

I recalled how, because they shared backgrounds that had much in common and also feeling themselves to be in a foreign land, they would delight to talk together. In particular two topics seemed to fascinate them. If one of them had been to see the doctor the others would be eager to hear what symptoms had been discussed and what the doctor had prescribed. I was amused by what seemed to be to be their hypochondria, particularly as none of them had much experience of ill health. No doubt my amused and condescending attitude was brought about by my upbringing; by my father's scepticism about the abilities and skill of doctors and his own stoicism and reticence about any aches and pains he occasionally suffered. Also at school any fussing about one's health would have been quickly mocked by both students and teachers.

The other topic, which my American colleagues discussed with similar enthusiasm, and which particularly marked them as young Americans, was when the United States had "gone bad". They were all agreed that it had happened, but were not agreed upon the specific year in which it had come about. They had grown up experiencing the post war euphoria when Americans realized that they were the dominant world power with no apparent limits to its opportunities. Their expectations had been great and perhaps so great as to impossible of realization. They were certainly dissatisfied with what they were offered in the early '60s and found themselves working in Canada for a variety of reasons, amongst them their dislike of the Vietnam War and their fear of what it might do to their private lives. Their dissatisfactions and their feelings that they were having to put up with a second best choice, led me to realize that these were feelings that I never experienced, and that in consequence, I was lucky to have grown up in the impoverished Ireland of the 1920s and '30s. For there, we all knew that important things happened somewhere else: in London or in Paris, where power was centered, the Arts flourished and new technologies developed.

It seems strange now to realize that during these years I knew next to nothing about America and I hardly ever heard it talked about during my childhood and school days. In part we knew so little about America because of the growth of "isolationism" in the 1920s when that country turned away from Europe, but surely it was in part caused by there being no Henry Luce; no Life Magazine whose photojournalism was so dramatically to glamorize and mythologize an America which perhaps only existed between the covers of his periodicals. This came about in the 1930s and by the 1940s Life had an almost world wide circulation.

*This rambling account of my father's early life was left unfinished and has been assembled with some minor editing from various pieces of his writing. KW

I had not seen the magazine until I went to university when I would hurry each week to the periodical table in the Historical Society to find the new copy and to devour the photographs which portrayed so convincingly that optimistic, ever expanding best of all possible worlds. Perhaps my colleagues regretted not the real United States but that seductive and distorted image that Luce in particular but other periodicals also so successfully portrayed. To me it had all the seduction and charm of William Saroyan's story "The Summer of the Wonderful White Horse" which I also read in those years. Both had the fairy tale charm of an "Arabian Nights' Tale" but I was quite sure that such an enchanting world was not to be found in Ireland. Perhaps my American colleagues were also enchanted by this seductive dream but unlike me believed that it was to be found on the other side of the school yard fence.

Since coming to Victoria I have wondered what, other than its being a small country permitting only limited and perhaps more realistic expectations, made Ireland a desirable country to grow up in at that time. It certainly was a most impoverished country which from 1916 until 1922 had fought a war against the British authorities, a war that was to be brought to an unsatisfactory and compromised conclusion when I was two years old with the setting up of the Irish Free State and the partitioning of the country.

For two hundred and fifty years the economy of Ireland had been organized to supply England with agricultural produce and during that time she had little trade with other countries. After the peace treaty Britain behaved in much the same way as the Americans did at the end of Vietnam War and in a similar way tended to sulk over their enforced withdrawal. In addition they were also sunk in the terrible First World War economic depression so that even if they had had the inclination they had little surplus money to lend to Ireland to help overcome the effects of six years of guerrilla warfare and economic dislocation. The country, poor before the First World War, was left with its infrastructure in ruins and with little capital with which to rebuild. That was the political reality of Ireland in the 1920s and '30s. It was a reality that I had no idea of in childhood and only began to understand when I was an undergraduate and went to the meeting of the Fabian Society and amongst others heard James Larkin speak.

Apart from this general situation of Ireland the position of Irish Protestants had been changed drastically by the six year insurrection and their favoured position greatly eroded. They were not only much poorer but were also less powerful. This pervasive, but hardly ever articulated recognition that things had once been better, was like a slight but always present scent – as it were the smell of dry rot in an old house – which hangs about the sentiments, and memories of those strange times. I wonder if I can evoke the distinctive qualities of that world and if I can suggest why in spite of its many limitations, it was a fortunate time and place in which to grow up.

I was born at 15 Albert Road, Sandycove on June 7th 1920 in a house that my father and grandmother had bought sometime before 1910. Albert Road (named after the Prince Consort) runs south from the main Dalkey-Dublin Road towards Killiney Hill. The lower part of the road where number 15 is began to be developed in the 1880s and mostly consists of modest stucco finished terrace houses, single storied at the front and with a two storied return at the back. The small front garden was enclosed by a low wall, as was and the slightly larger back where my father grew vegetables. I have few memories of this house.

My father's choice of this locality can be easily understood. This community like so much else had grown literally out of the English connections. The small community of Dalkey is medieval and had long existed as a fishing community and its harbour at Bullock had been used by small sailing boats from North Wales at least as early as Elizabethian times. At the end of the 18th century a harbour was built at Howth on the north arm of Dublin Bay for the Dublin-Holyhead packet boat service, but silted so badly that it proved to be unsatisfactory and was replaced between 1817 and 1821 by the great artificial harbour designed by Rennie and constructed at Dunlearg (Dun Laoghaire) renamed Kingstown to commemorate George IV departure from there after his state visit to Ireland in 1821. This all weather harbour could accommodate much larger ships and when in 1835 it was linked to Dublin by the building of the Dublin-Kingstown railway, suburban development quickly followed along the south shore of Dublin Bay. Later in the century in the incorporation of the Dublin Kingstown Railway into the Dublin South Eastern Railway made possible the extension of the line to Dalkey, Killiney, Bray and beyond and the consequent expansions of suburban development southward along the coast.

The choice of Sandycove as a place to live will have been determined by its being a relatively inexpensive pleasant community near to the seas with a frequent service both by tram and train into Dublin. A three or four minute walk northward down Albert Road would have got my father to the tram and a 10 or 12 minute walk in the opposite direction would get him to the Glenageary railway station. The railway and more particularly the times of trains played an important part in our domestic life and perhaps for that reason I have a great affection for suburban railway lines with their small dusty soot smelling Victorian stations, which were so busy each morning and evening but so little used throughout the day, their bridges, tunnels and weed grown embankments and the views they provided of the varied suburban back gardens. During my childhood I would often bicycle or walk to meet my father coming off the train and walk home with him and the other similar workers who were hurrying back to supper.

My mother and father had married in the summer of 1917. Their meeting and getting to know one another was certainly a result of changes brought about by the First World War, for though they both went to St. Paul's Church in Glenageary, where my mother sang in the choir, they did not move in the same social group. As the war continued and casualties increased more and more men went into the army and their places were taken by women. My mother was persuaded to go and work as a bookkeeper in the family hardware and building supply business - Fletcher & Phillipson on Baggot Street in Dublin - to replace a man who had joined up. Earlier in the war my mother had joined the St. John's Ambulance Brigade and this together with her unexpected job, must have been a great source of satisfaction to her for she travelled in and out of Dublin each day and met a greater variety of people than she had previously done. She certainly enjoyed it for it was a subject she talked of a great deal throughout my childhood. It also allowed her to escape from a home life which as she grew older must have seemed increasingly oppressive. Her two elder brothers and her sister had all married before the war. Her young brother was still in school but was soon to enlist as an underage volunteer. Added to this her father was in bad health and becoming increasingly an invalid so that the daily trips to Dublin must have seemed to many women in similar war time situations, a very welcome novelty.

I imagine that my mother and father must have seen one another daily at the railway station and met in that way. Certainly by Easter 1916 they were very well acquainted, for when the Easter Rebellion occurred, my father, who was then the manager of the Crown

Alley Telephone Exchange, bicycled the seven and a half miles into Dublin - there were no trains or trams running - to keep the exchange operating. Going through my father's papers after he died I came upon a small envelope marked "rebellion passes" in my father's handwriting. It contained my father's blue identity card for the year 1916 countersigned by the officer commanding the telephone exchange. With it are three scraps of paper dated the 2nd, 3rd, and 8th of May which are police and military authorizations to permit him to move about the streets of the city. Such scraps of paper seem to epitomize a military crisis and how a great empire might set about regaining control of its disaffected subjects. The fifth piece of paper is the strangest of all. It is a small sheet of thin manila paper 4½" x 8" embossed in the top left hand corner with the initial G.R. which reads "I have the pleasure in informing you that your Staff Docket has been endorsed in the following terms 'thanked by the P.M.G. for valuable services which by zeal and devotion to duty were rendered to the Government and the Country in a critical period' papers 92818/16 Eng minute No360. 11 July 1916". On such small sheets is devotion to be duly recorded.

I can remember my father describing how while he was riding his bicycle near Booterstown on the Wednesday of the Rising, he met a unit of English soldiers halted by the roadside, who had earlier disembarked from the mail boat at Kingstown and were being marched into Dublin. The young officer in command stopped my father and asked him whether they were on the right road to Dublin. Many of his men seemed to believe that they had just landed in France. They were in fact ambushed a little farther along the road before they reached Ballsbridge.

My mother who for the whole week of the rebellion could not go to work in the city would phone up the exchange to make sure that he arrived safely and always claimed that she came to be able to distinguish the different kinds of gunfire which she heard over the phone. I have always assumed that it was this heroic week which determined her to marry my father. I don't know how difficult she found it to persuade her parents to allow her to do this for they, with the snobbism they certainly possessed, would probably have thought him no great match for her. Also she always believed that her parents and her brothers and sisters had tacitly agreed amongst themselves that Phoebe Julia as the unmarried sister would stay at home and look after her parents. Whether that was true or not she will have realized that she was no longer young and like many other women at that time she used the unexpected opportunities offered by the war to escape from an increasingly dull home life.

They were married in the summer of 1917 and had a honeymoon at Glengarriff in West County Cork. Grandmother Wallace moved out of 15 Albert Road and went to live with a cousin, a Miss May Garrett who ran a girl's school in Ballinasloe and my mother and father set up house with their new furniture and a live-in maid. A maid servant may now seem an expensive luxury but in 1917 a maid was paid very little. I don't know if their first maid was Ellie Murphy. I think probably not. Certainly by 1919 she had come to work for my mother and was always praised as possessing all the virtues needed in a maid servant. Ellie was from County Wexford and like so many of these maids was a country girl, the daughters of small farmers and like them she was saving up her small wages to have a marriage dowry. Ellie played an important part in my early childhood and remained with us until I was eight years old when she made a "good match" and married a publican who owned a bar and grocery store in Enniscorthy. She didn't have a long married life for she died giving birth to her third child.

My close and affectionate relationship with Ellie is but a particular example of the almost universal relationship between the children of Anglo-Irish families and their Catholic

servants - nursery maids, parlour maids, cooks, butlers, stable boys, grooms and gardeners - who were of another and older rural culture of Ireland. This long standing relationship of Anglo-Irish children and their Irish servants, which goes back to the 17th century and which was so often the closest and most affectionate relationship of their childhood, was very similar to that between American children of the southern states and their black nannies and household servants. It is surely in this way that the children of English settlers were transformed into Anglo-Irish, speaking a different form of English with a different intonation, but above all through this contact becoming quite unconsciously the partial inheritors of the songs, dances, stories and mythologies of that older and disposed culture.

In England the First World War was remarkable for the extraordinary divorce that occurred between the civilian population at home, whose xenophobic notions of the war was formed and manipulated by the popular press and was designed to keep the civilian population ignorant of the dreadful reality experienced by the wretched troops engaged in the bloody slaughter in France. As the war continued the lives of the combatants became increasingly unintelligible to the civilian population at home.

In Ireland after 1916, the Easter Rising began to change this strangely artificial situation. The rising was crushed in less than a week but Dubliners were shocked by the amount of damage that had been done to the centre of the city by the British bombardment. Through the late spring and early summer the long drawn out trials and executions of the sixteen leaders of the insurrection dramatically changed the attitude of Dubliners and gradually the majority of the people throughout the country came to understand the significance of "the Rising". From 1917 until 1921 the incomprehension of the life of combatants by the civilian population was to disappear as the guerrilla warfare of Sinn Fein intensified. It ended in a truce and an unsatisfactory treaty which partitioned Ireland and established the Irish Free State. This treaty split the Sinn Fein movement and led to a civil war between those who accepted the treaty and those who wanted an independent republic for the whole of Ireland. Later, the introduction of British military police, the Black and Tans was to put all civilians in the front line. This bitterly divisive struggle lasted from June 1922 to May 1923.

My father was quite apolitical unlike my mother, who though she had no sympathy at all for Sinn Fein, had been raised in a family which was strongly opposed to British rule and had always supported home rule and the stand of the Irish Party in the Westminster Parliament. So that her stand was always strongly nationalistic and no IRA man could have been more outspoken in expressing disgust and hatred for the Provisional Police - the Black and Tans - who terrorized the population of Ireland from 1919 to the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. So while my newly married mother and father may not have been aware that what they were witnessing was the extinguishing of the privileges and power of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland they can not but have realized that they were living in dangerous and very uncertain times and their quite different temperaments and backgrounds must have lead to different reactions.

We had a washer woman who came to do our laundry each Monday. She was on Albert Road, going to another of her customers, when a lorry full of Free State soldiers drew up to a house opposite number 15 and there was an outburst of rifle fire. She, poor woman was terrified, and ran to our door in order to get off the street. My memory is of being in the darkened front sitting room where the blinds has been drawn. My mother was leaning against the wall on one side of the window and the washer woman against the other side, holding me pressed against her dark blue apron which smelled strongly of the large bars of unscented soap used to do the laundry. The shooting must have lasted only a very short

time before the soldiers arrested and brought out several men and a woman which they loaded into the lorry. I have an image of my mother peering around the edge of the blind and commenting on how brazenly the woman was abusing the soldiers.

We continued to live in the house on Albert Road until the autumn of 1924 when we moved about a mile and a half to the south to "Telde". This house had been built by my maternal grandfather Phillipson about 1900 who had quite mistakenly thought that his eldest son, my uncle Burton, and his newly married wife would like to live next door to him. With this idea in mind he had built Telde as an addition to his own newly purchased house, Woodbank. It was one of three large stucco houses, each on large lots, built on speculation in the 1820's. However there were profound emotional factors which coloured my mother's feelings about Telde. She thought of it as an unlucky house in which her favourite brother had become an alcoholic and his marriage fell apart. Gradually over a long time I became aware of these feelings and coloured my own feelings for the house.

I have a memory of the move to Telde. I remember being in my grandmother's large living room and of shunting a train of wooden bricks on the red blue and green patterns of her Turkish carpet. I have many memories of Ellie in Telde but none in the earlier house. Similarly the black female cat that had so many litters of kittens of whom I was so fond and of whom I have so many memories by the fire in the drawing room at Telde and lying on the back steps in the sun, was already with us in Albert Road but I have no recollection of her there. I can also remember watching out of the large window as the furniture van drawn by two horses struggled up the rather steep and winding driveway with our furniture.

As a child I greatly enjoyed living in Telde and as I grew older I particularly liked the large garden behind the house and the more than an acre of field in front. However latterly I came to think of Telde as being rather oppressive. This may, in part, have been due to the unusual shape of its rooms. Telde shared a common façade with Woodbank which meant that the rooms in the smaller house had to be the same height as those in the older house. The result was that the sitting rooms and the larger bedrooms were as high as they were wide and in the smaller bedrooms the proportions were even more grotesque.

As my parents were different physically, so their temperaments differed. My father was gentle, phlegmatic, humorous, enjoying stories and jokes, not given to outbursts of anger nor was he melancholy, but rather tended to take the world as he found it. Very law abiding and honourable. Painstaking with small details but not concerning himself with large plans. By contrast my mother was much more moody and all her life had suffered from frequent bad headaches so that she would have "bad days". She was much more opinionated and very dogmatic in expressing those opinions and often very tactless, and being very determined would have found it very hard to apologize or admit that she was in the wrong. But in spite of her rather overbearing nature people tended to accept her general good intentions and to even enjoy the mocking and astringent humour with which she said what she meant.

Presumably it takes some time for a child to form notions about the distinctive character of its parents and it is not until teenage years this analysis is in its most active and ruthless phase so that few of us have much knowledge of how the characters of our parents reacted upon one another in the early years of their marriage and before we were born. I remember some hints from my mother's conversation which suggested that there had been battles between them in these early stages. Certainly by the time I became aware of the

domestic economy my mother was absolutely dominant in that sphere. My father brought home, on the last day of the month, his pay packet. He was paid in cash, not by cheque and she gave him his monthly allowance and his travel and lunch money. She banked the money and paid the bills. He had no bank account and probably little idea of how much money was in her account. I can remember her saying to me when I was about ten or twelve years old "I would never tell your father how much money I have in the bank for he would be after me to buy a new car". Certainly after my mother's death (in 1959) he was very surprised to discover how much money was in this account! Neither did he immediately set out as she seems to have feared, to squander it on new cars and the like but rather became as carefully penny pinching as she had been.

In 1924 my parents went to London to visit a Harley Street specialist for a medical check up for my father, and to visit the Wembley Exhibition. He was told that he had cataracts on both eyes and might expect to go blind soon and that his heart was so bad that he might have easily died of heart failure at any time. He was 87 when he died in 1965. He could still read with the aid of a magnifying glass. He died not of heart disease but of kidney failure. The London specialists were wrong on both counts; their only success was to make him a depressed and anxious man for some time after and to destroy his enjoyment of London and the excitement of the Empire Exhibition. It affected my father in that it confirmed his scepticism of all professional people; doctors and lawyers in particular whom he tended to regard as dishonest and ignorant charlatans.

The London doctor's horrifying prognostications had an ongoing effect upon our daily life. While he worked in the Department of Post and Telegraphs my father had to be in his office by 9 o'clock which meant that he left the house at 8 o'clock to catch a Dublin train that arrived at Glenageary Station at 8:12. My mother suspected that my father sometimes ran the whole way to the train and quite frequently sprinted the last section to the station because he had seen the smoke of the engine as it left Dalkey, the next station down the line. With the doctor's forecasts in mind she was confident that one day he would die in the train of a heart attack. To forestall this disaster she would try to get him out of the house a little earlier by surreptitiously pushing the hands of the clock forward. This sometimes led to my father being very angry to discover that he had run for the train before the usual one he needed to catch. He quickly realized what she was doing and would only trust his watch knowing that the clocks might show only my mother's idea of the time. She never ceased to worry about this, though ironically my father was to continue to catch those trains for more than four years after she was dead.

Here ends my father's recollections of his childhood; it's unfortunate that he never completed the story. He certainly regaled us children with anecdotes about his school days. At a young age he was sent away to boarding school, a traumatic experience for a child who until then had led quite a sheltered life at home. The first of these schools was Aravon in Bray, and then St. Columba's College in 1933 after which he went to Trinity College Dublin in 1939.

George Wallace met Margaret Howe who's family had originally come from Kilbride, Co. Wicklow at a puppet theatre group in Dublin in 1942. They married shortly after the war ended.

Kit Wallace, February 2016



George Wallace as a young child with a cousin Helen in the foreground. Behind are his father George Leghorn Wallace, his mother Phoebe Julia Phillipson and his father's cousin, Mrs Garrett, probably taken about 1922 in the back garden of 15 Albert Road.

In Ireland throughout the 1920s and 1930s refrigeration was very uncommon and therefore milk was usually delivered twice a day, once at breakfast time and again in the late afternoon. Mr. Gibbs, our milkman came in a handsome single horse cart painted dark green outlined in red and made splendid with shiny varnish. His cart contained two large brass bound milk cans with brass taps which projected through the back board. He carried the milk to the door in a glorified watering can (also brass bound) and from its spout hung a pint measure. When he came to the door, our maid would bring a jug and tell him how much milk she needed. He would measure the milk into her jug and then he would give her a little more called "the tilly". If his cows were not milking well, the tilly might be small. Our maid would watch the tilly carefully and if it was small would comment, "You gave me a poor tilly today!"

In 1927 James Joyce published a small book called *Poems Pennyeach*, which cost one shilling. There were twelve pennies in a shilling. The book contains thirteen poems. One is called *The Tilly*.