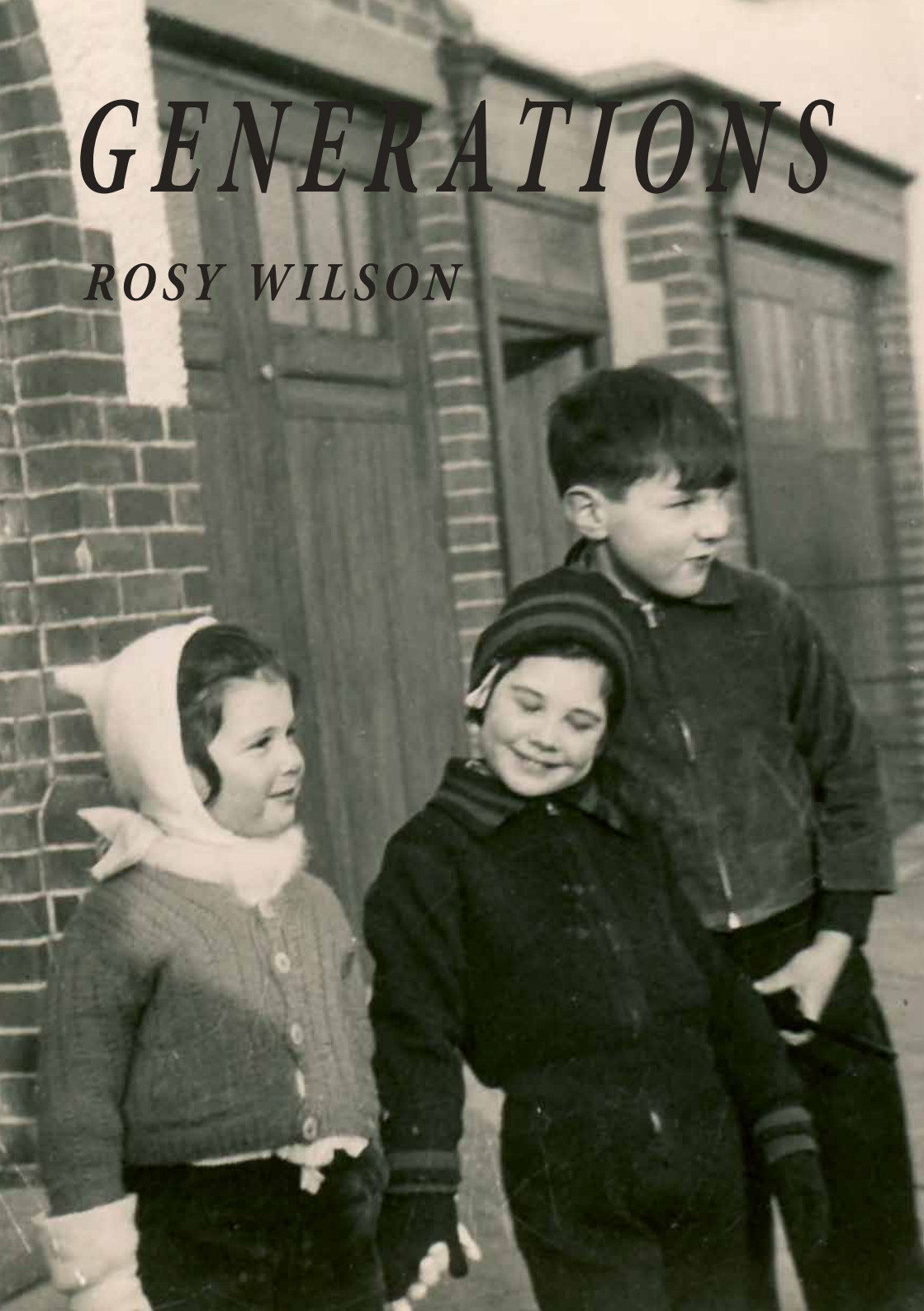


GENERATIONS

ROSY WILSON



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Tell us about when you were children...

At various times our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews would ask me about our family, parents, grandparents, people in our lives when we were growing up.

This book relates family stories in prose and poems. It is neither history nor memoir, more memories and imaginings than research. As an eighty seven year old Cailleach or Crone I'm stitching a tapestry of family characters as truly as I can remember our stories, aware that my perspective is my own. Were the people in the story to relate it, different pictures might emerge.

I'm beginning with our Gran's story, our mother's mother, which includes my grandfather and our mother's girlhood. Then I follow with sections for each of the main characters as I remember us from my years six to twelve, 1944 to 1950. While they were alive, I checked in to some extent with my brother, Patrick Morreau, sister, Mary Sheridan, cousin/brother-in-law, John Sheridan, who all shared these years with me. There were no glaring discrepancies but any factual mistakes are mine.

My thanks to son, Paul Haydock-Wilson, for second reading and publishing the book; to nephew, Mark Morreau, for sharing his research relating to our grandfather, Martin O'Flanagan, and for photos; to niece, Judy Sheridan for other photos. I also acknowledge the publishers of my poetry collections, Carol Boland of Boland Press and Dennis Greig of Lapwing Publications and Paul Haydock-Wilson of H-W Press, where most of the poems were first published. Sadly Dennis passed away in December 2023 and is sorely missed.

I write in gratitude to our ancestors, parents and grandparents, to whom we owe so much of who we are. Especially our mother Cicely O'Flanagan/Morreau/Collett and our Gran, Mary Shaw/Smith/O'Flanagan, who made a home for us in the years I'm remembering.

My Early Life - Our Grandmother Tells Her Story

I was born, Mary Hellaby Shaw, in 1875 in Stretford, a market town outside Manchester, on the River Mersey. I was one of five children, Allen was the eldest, but sadly he died young, Hettie, my beloved younger sister also didn't live long into womanhood, Nellie, my elder sister used to tease me and Oliver was always set in his ways. He was never very interested in people, worked as a ship's engineer, travelling the world until his retirement. He died, still a bachelor, in his nineties. Nellie married young and had one son, Roy, the apple of her eye, a fine young man who sadly was killed in action in World War One where he served as a pilot in the newly formed RAF. Nellie was heartbroken and never got over the loss of Roy, though she was a strong, independent woman who lived until her eighties.

We were a reasonably happy family until my mother died when I was eight years old. Father withdrew and shortly after married again. Our stepmother was unkind to us, resented this family she was landed with. She employed a housekeeper, Mrs Nutter, to look after us, a cruel woman, always cross and giving out. She made us do all the chores then found fault with whatever we did. Nellie stood up to her and was often punished. Our father was a distant figure in our household.

I was a gentle, sensitive girl but sensible enough to know that all was not right at home. I hated the atmosphere that our stepmother and Mrs Nutter created. I read a lot, especially poetry and withdrew into my poets' worlds to escape from the harsh family life. I learned their poems by heart: Grey's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, Wordsworth's *Daffodils*, Shakespeare's soliloquies and sonnets. On Sundays we were only allowed to read the Bible and Milton, rich worlds to explore.

In my teens I went to be a governess in Kendal in the Lake District. I thrived in the lakes and mountains, long country walks, wild flowers, the joys of nature. The family was kind, their three children enjoyed my lessons, especially learning and reciting poems, making up their own stories, drawing pictures and colouring them in. I'd take them for rambles in the woods and we'd collect kindling for the fires, sycamore wings, acorns and conkers for our nature table. There was a small dramatic society nearby

that I joined and acted with – how I longed to be an actress! And of course I wrote and put on plays with the children I taught. I have an artistic temperament. This was a very happy period of my life and a lesson for me in family living.

In 1890 my father died and I was summoned back to the house in Stretford where my step mother and Nellie were living. In 1901 I was baptised into the Church of England. I continued to work as a governess but not living in. In my early twenties I was courted by James Eckersley Smith, a doctor in Manchester Royal Infirmary. He was a good, caring man and a much respected doctor. I was happy in his generous love. We married in 1900.

We moved into a house, 120 Alexander Road in Manchester. At last a home of my own, not dominated by an unloving step mother and bossy elder sister. In 1903, to James and my delight, our beautiful baby girl, Jacqueline Elizabeth Smith was born. We doted on her. James was doing well and had set up in general practice as well as his hospital work. We were a happy family. Then suddenly, with no warning signs, James died in 1906. There we were Jacqueline and I, a toddler not yet three and a single mother. We were bereft.

Martin and Mary O'Flanagan

Also living in Alexander Road was James' friend and fellow doctor, Martin O'Flanagan. They had trained together as physicians and surgeons in Manchester Royal Infirmary and practised there as well as setting up in private practice. Martin was Irish and proud of it although his father, Peter O'Flanagan brought him over to England with his mother née Kate Cassidy and five sisters when Martin was only eight. His father worked in the Civil Service so could be transferred anywhere within the Union of Great Britain and Ireland following the Act of Union, passed on 1st January, 1801. Martin had five sisters, three were nuns so we never met them. Mary Kate was married to Patrick Flanagan who she always referred to as, *that Irish peasant*, although he was also an Irish civil servant like her father. Martin was living at The Hollies which was also his practice address. Also living there were his father and mother and a sister, Edith.

After James died Martin was very helpful to me, a great support both with sorting probate and keeping me company. He loved Jacqueline, a very good little girl, quite knowing. We became close and on the ninth November, 1907 our daughter, Mary Cicely Josephine O'Flanagan, was born. Martin registered her birth with both our names, mother and father, on the birth certificate. We loved each other, were overjoyed with Cicely, a little sister for Jacqueline.

However all was not well in the Hollies. Peter O'Flanagan was unhappy that his son was proposing to marry a non-Catholic widow who already had one daughter and now another who he labelled *illegitimate*. Kate, his wife, was dominated by her husband and, though I imagine she could love her only granddaughter, she didn't dare go against Peter's dictates. Martin would have wanted to bring me and the girls to live with him in the Hollies, but that was not practicable as long as hostile parents were in his house. For my part I was happy in my own home with my girls. Martin spent as much time as he could spare from his busy practice with us.

Martin's mother died in 1913, his father in 1915. On the eighth of June 1916 we married in the Roman Catholic church. It was a quiet wedding, Martin's cousin, Nicholas Sheridan, and his sister, Edith O'Flanagan were

our witnesses. Jacqueline, now thirteen, and Cicely, age nine were our bridesmaids. They were thrilled and everyone admired the two pretty girls all dressed up, carrying posies of red roses. Soon after, I moved with the girls into the Hollies. I made several changes, employed a cook and worked with Martin as receptionist and accountant. I even assisted at minor surgery which, in those days was carried out in the doctor's home. The girls were happy at school, knew they were much loved but were also aware that the practice came first.

Shortly after our wedding I converted to Catholicism to please my husband as was usual in those days. Jacqueline also chose to convert and Cicely had been baptised Catholic in her first year. So every Sunday we all went to Mass. Martin was very happy about this. I was still attached to the Bible we read when I was a child and was not convinced by all the Catholic dogmas and practices but I kept these opinions to myself.

We were both surprised when Jacqueline, soon after leaving school, told us she wanted to become a nun. However much we advised her to wait, to live a while in the world as a young woman, her mind was made up. She joined, as a novice, the Holy Child Jesus convent in Mayfield, Sussex. This was a teaching order founded by Mother Cornelia Connolly in the mid nineteenth century and more modern than most religious orders. Her name thereafter was first Sister then Mother Mary Cyril. This was a big wrench for us as nuns were not allowed to visit their family homes so we rarely saw her. She was happy. When she was professed she was sent *On the Missions* to Cape Coast, Gold Coast, West Africa. She loved the country, the people and her work as teacher and organist. In 1957 Gold Coast was the first colony in Africa to achieve independence. Jacqueline was then the headmistress of the biggest girls' school and brought all her girls and teachers out onto the streets waving flags to celebrate and welcome Nkrumah, first President of Ghana.

Despite our initial reservations, we were very proud of her, we wrote letters to each other regularly on flimsy blue airmail forms, but I missed her terribly as did Cicely, her devoted younger sister. At this time, busy with the practice, we thought it would be good for Cicely to go to boarding school for the company as well as the education.

Doctor Martin O'Flanagan

the most loved and respected man in Whalley Range

We were happy when Poppa came to live with us
even though the house was too small for all of us

my sister and I aged five and four
were lodged with strangers in Ballybrack

who fed us puddings we called pink fluff
and gave me parsley to cure mouth ulcers.

Every day Poppa took us out for walks
all the way to the end of Dun Laoghaire pier

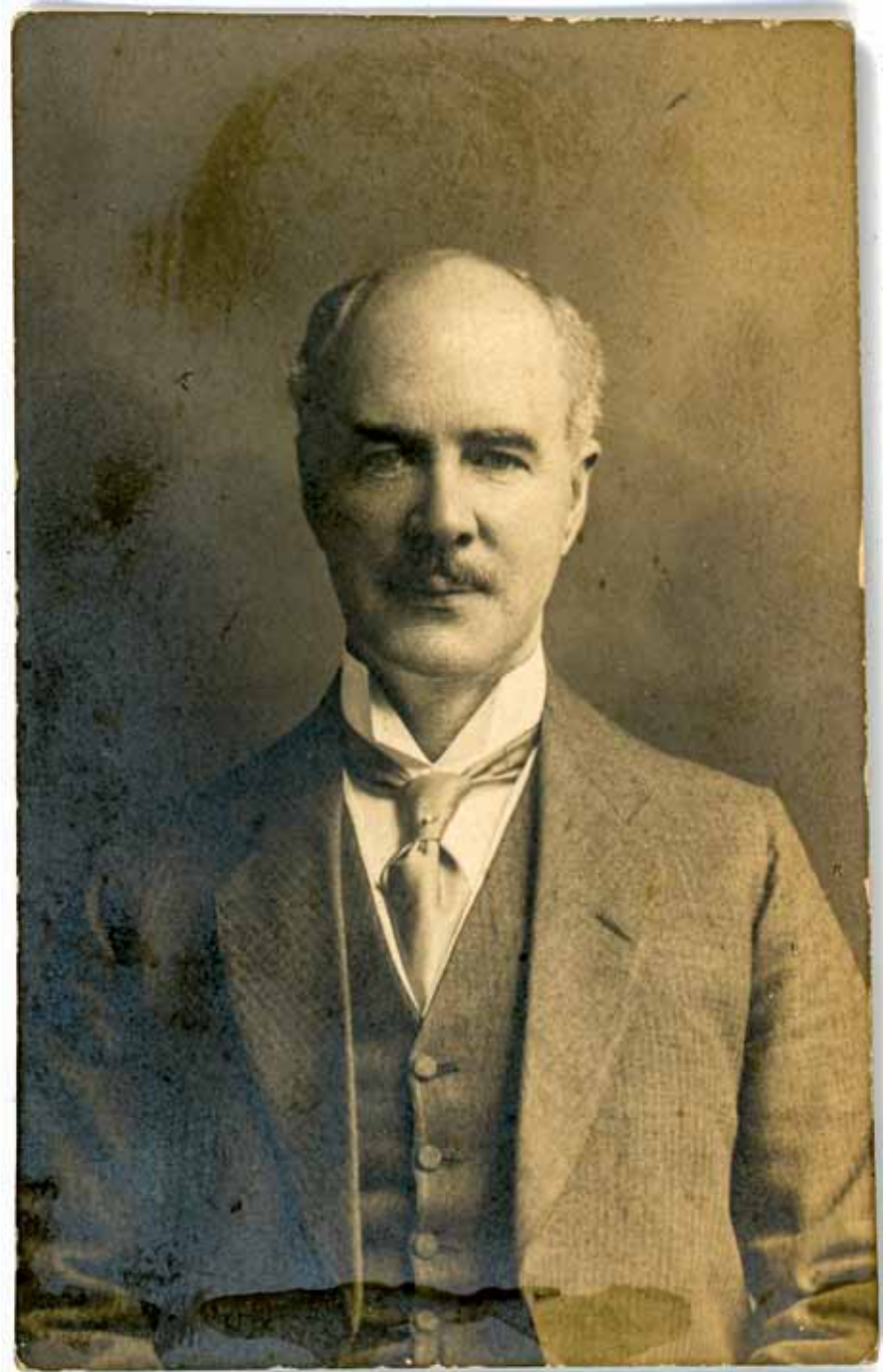
he talked to us, taught breathing and eye
exercises for us to practise all our lives.

He gave me a box of ivory and ebony
dominos, we turned numbers

on the floor of our mother's front room;
little girls we never guessed that

our grandfather left his practice in Manchester
to come home for his daughter

to nurse him during his last days
spent in our home in St Helen's Road.



Cicely O'Flanagan and Cecil Morreau

Roehampton Sacred Heart Convent was the leading girls' Catholic school. Vivian Leigh, the actress and Antonia White the novelist, who wrote *Frost in May* about the school, were her contemporaries there. We wanted the best for our dear Cicely. We didn't realise how strange boarding school with all its rules and regulations was for a girl accustomed to the run of her home and the neighbourhood, secure in the love of her devoted parents. Only later did we learn stories of over-strict nuns, rules like girls must never go about in twos, as this could be occasion for sin, having to undress and bathe in gowns so as not to look at their own naked bodies and many other restrictions.

After school, because Cicely had a beautiful contralto singing voice, we sent her to a music school in Paris also to learn French. But she really wanted to be a nurse so she returned after an enjoyable year and enrolled as a nurse in Manchester Royal Infirmary. She loved caring for her patients, didn't mind all the menial chores of a first year nurse. The Matron was terrifying and the rules very strict, like boarding school, but she was happy and made friends among her fellow nurses. Despite the hierarchy the girls had a lot of fun. Martin was very proud of his nurse daughter working in his hospital.

At this time Cicely was also being courted by Cecil Morreau, a young architect who had just graduated from Cambridge with a double first. His family had a business in Manchester. They were Jewish though not Orthodox nor very religious. Cicely and Cecil were very much in love and he proposed to her. For Cicely it was a dilemma. She did not want to leave nursing but was not allowed to continue if she married. In the end her ward Sister said to her, *You don't want to grow old and lonely like me, go on and marry your young man.* Martin liked Cecil but would have preferred a Catholic husband for his only daughter. I was pleased, they were happy together and he had good prospects. I was very fond of him, we got on well, he was quiet and respectful. Also I believe both Jews and Catholics are very family-minded and that augured well.

So, in August 1932, Cecil, age twenty-six and Cicely age twenty-four were married in our local Catholic Church. It was a lovely wedding, a beauti-

ful happy couple and a big attendance. Martin was very popular - *the most loved and respected man in Wally Range* - and Cicely's nursing colleagues were all there too with both families. Only Jacqueline was missing though she sent her greetings and shared our delight for the occasion.

For our family this was a happy time. Martin was doing well both with his practice and his hospital work. I was very busy in the home and keeping the practice going both as accountant and receptionist, enjoying the friendship of many of the patients. Martin and I had a very equal marriage, not always the case in those days. Jacqueline was enthusiastic about her work and confident in her vocation. Cicely and Cecil were enjoying the bliss of being in love, married and setting up their home in Woburn Place, Bloomsbury, London, a centre of culture and social life. Cecil was working as a housing architect in London County Council, enjoyed the work and had supportive work mates. They were both serious people and not part of the hectic party life of many contemporaries. Ramsey MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party was Prime Minister again from 1929 to 1935 and they were both Labour voters. They were very aware of social problems of these years, with the fall out from the Wall Street Crash in 1929 followed by the Great Depression.

These were the 1930s, Hitler and his Nazi Party were elected to govern Germany, Mussolini and his Fascist Party were already in power in Italy. Oswald Mosely was holding huge rallies of Blackshirts in England. In 1936 Franco led a revolt against the Spanish elected government and the Spanish Civil War engaged many nations, with Germany and Italy supporting Franco and the Soviet Union, with the International Brigade of people of many countries who were opposed to Fascism, fighting for the Republic. London poets and intellectuals among others supported anti-fascists and many joined the Spanish Republic's side. These were turbulent times and Cicely and Cecil were well aware of all the issues.

Victor Gollancz set up Gollancz Publishing Company in 1928 and in May 1936 set up The Left Book Club to, *Help in the struggle for world peace and against Fascism.* They aimed to break even with two thousand five hundred members, each member getting one book a month. However the membership rose to forty thousand in the first year and fifty-seven thousand by

1939. Books, exclusive to members, sold for two shillings and sixpence. The books addressed the political and other issues of these years and educated a generation. Golancz published novels and pacifist and socialist non-fiction, describing himself as a Christian Socialist. Authors included Ford Maddox Ford, George Orwell's early books, Elizabeth Bowen, Daphne du Maurier, Franz Kafka, Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender, R.H. Tawney John Strachey among many others. Cecil and Cicely were members of this book club and avid readers of their monthly books. They passed several on to us and I was pleased to keep up to date with contemporary work.

Early in 1939 Cecil, knowing war with Hitler's Germany was inevitable, signed up to serve with the Royal Engineers' Regiment, known as the Sappers. He planned for Cicely to take their three children to family in Ireland. Tragically, in April 1939, Cecil was taken ill and died within days. Cicely was bereft, left with one boy age four and two girls age two and nine months old she succeeded in letting out their home and taking the family to her cousin, Edna Sheridan, widow of Nicholas Sheridan who was a witness at Martin's and my wedding. They arrived in Ravensdale, outside Dundalk, Co Louth, on the first of September 1939, the day war broke out.

We were separated from Cicely and her children. Ireland was neutral during World War Two, or the Emergency as they called it. Martin was Irish and though his patients remained loyal to him others objected. He made no pretence of his Irish origins and loyalties even called his Airedale dog Dev, short for DeValera, the Irish Taoiseach or Prime Minister. English patriots blamed Dev for refusing to let England use Irish Ports, as this would be a denial of their neutrality. In retrospect England benefitted. If Germany had an excuse to invade Ireland, that would open another front for an invasion of England.

These were uncomfortable years for us in Manchester. We missed Cicely but were pleased that she and the children were safe from the Blitz. We would be reunited after the war but we longed to be with our bereaved daughter and her children during this hard time for her.

In 1942, Martin realised his health was failing and he was no longer able for the demands of his practice and the hospital work. He longed to return

to Ireland to be with Cicely and her children. Travel between England and Ireland was very difficult during the war. Martin was born in Ireland so we managed to get him a passport to travel to his family there. I had to stay until the war was over. This was our first separation in nearly forty years. I saw him off on the train to Holyhead whence he sailed to Dun Laoghaire. His nephew, Richard Flanagan, met him and drove to Cicely's house, 40, St Helen's Road, Dalkey, Co Dublin. There was a Great Reunion. Cicely and her children were delighted to have Poppa with them. I couldn't wait for the time to come when I could join them. Sadly Martin died in 1943 with Cicely and her children around him at her home.



Our Early Years in Ireland, 1939-1944

When Daddy died in 1939, our mother packed up our home, Hawksview, Merrow, Guildford, Surrey, rented it out and left with the three of us, age just five, three and fifteen months old, drove across England to Liverpool where we boarded the ferry to Dublin, North Wall. From there we made our way to the Sheridan family home, Aghneaskeagh, Ravensdale, Dundalk, Co Louth. We arrived on the first day of September 1939, the day World War Two was declared.

Nicholas Sheridan was a solicitor in Dundalk. He was Martin's cousin and had been Martin and Mary's - Poppa and Gran to us - witness at their wedding in Manchester. His wife, Edna, was much younger and she and our mother were friends, Mum used to spend holidays with them before she was married. They had four children. John, their youngest and the only boy, features in these stories. We must have been quite an invasion.

We stayed several months with the Sheridan family then moved to North Dublin to stay with Richard Flanagan, Mummy's first cousin, who is also part of these memories. We only spent a couple of months there.

Then we rented a house, Ard Cairn, near Naas, Co Kildare from an artist, Molly Brown, who became and remained a close friend to our mother for the rest of her life. She gave me a beautiful book of Irish Art in the Middle Ages for my wedding present in 1966. Molly stayed in her studio while we lived in her big house. The countryside was beautiful. I remember fields, streams, the cool feel of running barefoot on grass in the early morning. We used to have tea with scones and jam in the garden, wasps buzzed around, I denied being frightened of them and Molly told me off for telling lies.

A year later we moved again, renting from a family in Ballywaltrim, Bray Co Wicklow, I don't remember much of this time. Patrick started school in Bray but he caught scarlet fever so part of the home was isolated for him. I got double pneumonia there and was very ill for a time. It was treated with M and B tablets. Childhood illnesses were common then and, as it was before penicillin was in common use, the death toll was high. Mum nursed us well and we both recovered. For my fourth birthday I was given a

wooden Noah's Ark with pairs of all the animals, a wonderful gift. However my brother and sister, Patrick and Mary, decided to set the ark afloat. They brought it down the garden steps to launch on the Dargle River which carried it out to sea.

From Bray we moved to St Helen's Road in Booterstown where Poppa came to live with us during his last weeks. We loved him, never knew he was ill. He would take Mary and me on walks down Dun Laoghaire Pier and encourage us to do breathing and eye exercises. He gave me a wooden box of ivory and ebony dominoes for my birthday. We played dominoes on the floor, Poppa and Mum joining in. We used to go to Mass in Booterstown Church. When Poppa died in 1943 his funeral was there and he was buried in Dean's Grange Cemetery, Blackrock.

At Home in Beechcroft, 1944 to 1950

After our grandfather, Martin O’Flanagan, died, Gran sold up their Manchester home The Hollies and the GP practice. She and my mother bought Beechcroft, 63, Merrion Avenue, Blackrock, Co Dublin, not very far from our St Helen’s Road home. Gran was very pleased to join our family in Ireland. She had been lonely in Manchester after Martin had left for Ireland. She and Mum were devoted to each other, there was never a cross word and we three children hugely benefitted from Gran’s presence in our home.

The pages to come are all about the people who lived in Beechcroft or visited often during these years when I was aged six to twelve years. My memories of these years are much stronger and, on the whole, happy ones.

Beechcroft was a big family home in the middle of a residential street. You went up a few steps to the front door. On one side was the morning room where we mostly lived and off that a big conservatory where Gran planted and tended a variety of geraniums, all shapes, colours and scents. She used to water them with tea-leaves after breakfast, and the contents of chamber pots. On the other side of the hall was the drawing room much less used. They would sometimes have bridge parties in there or occasional visitors. Down three stairs were the kitchen with a coal-fired range for all our cooking – the warmest room in the house – and our dining room with a plain oak table and chairs with red cushions. On the first floor were two big bedrooms and two small ones. Mary and I shared one, though I slept in a little one off the main room. Patrick and our cousin John Sheridan shared the other and Mrs Breen had the little one in between. On the top floor were two more big bedrooms, one for Mum and the other for Gran. I don’t remember where our bathroom was.

There was a big garden where my mother loved to grow vegetables and flowers and, in the greenhouse, tomatoes and a peach tree, wonderful smells and tastes. The big lawn at the back of the house gave space for our games of football, French cricket, tennis and just running around. We had trees to climb and an apple and a Victorian plum tree we happily raided. I remember coming home from school one day and all the plums had been picked to make jam, a big disappointment.

All these moves must have been hard for our mother but she settled and made friends wherever we lived. She had a great capacity for loving and helping people from all walks of life. Friends and relations visiting used to tell us your mother is a saint and certainly she combined a deep Catholic faith with an openness to other beliefs and religions. Even in the austere and unforgiving Irish Catholicism of the 1940s and 50s, she would go to non-catholic weddings and funerals even though this was condemned as a mortal sin. She was emphatic that there is no hell even though hell-fire was preached to us at our weekly Sunday Mass.

All our friends found her sympathetic and understanding of their problems. However, Patrick, Mary and I learned very young that she preferred us not to have problems and, because we had no father, we felt we should protect her. Gran used to say *Cicely wears rose-coloured glasses* and her optimism, good nature and loving disposition certainly provided us with a happy family home during these years.

It was lovely having Gran live with us. She used to take Mary and me and Roger, our black cocker spaniel, for walks in Merrion Woods where we collected frogspawn in jam jars and kindling for our fireplaces. We’d spend a long time exploring among the trees and undergrowth and playing hide and seek. Now the woods are housing estates though a few trees remain. For some reason Gran thought of herself as a countrywoman and loved to be outdoors.

Gran’s love of poetry permeated our household. She never told us off but had an apt quotation for every occasion. When Mum, Mary and I were shouting to each other around the house she would say, a soft low voice is an excellent thing in woman from Shakespeare’s King Lear or, to conclude arguments with Patrick, which they both enjoyed, *I have no answer for such a vulgar taunt*. For me she quoted, *a rosebud full of little willful thorns, as sweet as Irish air could make her*. I’m sure she embedded in me a desire to write, especially poetry, even if I had to wait until I retired from work, in my sixties, to have the time.

Gran also loved to play cards, she taught us bridge when Mary and I were six and seven years old and, with John Sheridan who was living with us during the week, we played every evening after we cleared away the tea. Even now I remember her saying there were poor people walking the streets of London because they wouldn't lead trumps! She would say *Whisht* if we got too noisy, the German for silence. When Mum used to call us to bed, Gran would plead *just one more hand dear*. This pleased Mary and me, any excuse to stay up later. She also used to ask Mummy to play the piano and sing for her, Moore's melodies and Shakespeare songs among other favourites.

In her seventies her short-term memory failed and she went to a nursing home in Drumcondra, the north side of Dublin. When we visited and asked if she was lonely she'd reply, *No dear, I'm never lonely, I always have my poets with me*. Like many women of her generation she knew a huge range of poetry by heart. When she died she was buried with her beloved Martin in Deans Grange Cemetery.

Gran's Familiar

I always carry my familiar with me,
black velvet bag like a witch's cat,
tortoiseshell clasp, room inside for
glasses, a florin, a linen handkerchief.

When I mislay it my grand-daughters
find it now we live together; I take them
for walks in the woods, find frogspawn
and kindling; we play card games at night.

This is a change from all those years as a
doctor's wife with his surgery in our home
open all hours to his patients who loved him;
I was receptionist, accountant, assistant for

operations on the kitchen table - his scalpel
is there in the kitchen drawer. Though a
dedicated GP he never really settled in
Manchester, even with his Irish setter, Dev.

He was very happy to return to Ireland
where our daughter helped and nursed him
those final weeks with her three children
all around the bed when he was dying.

I love living with my daughter who plays piano
and sings Moore's melodies for me; I know
poems by heart, Milton, Shelley, the Psalms,
in their company I never feel alone.

Eleven in the evening, time to retire
accompanied by my familiar.

Wise Woman

for Mary O'Flanagan

When we asked Gran is there anything you want?
she'd look around then say no thank you, I have
all I need and more than I deserve, smile
at our mother, apple of her eye, at geraniums,
every hue, nourished with dregs from teapots,
contents of chamber pots *but if you're going
to the library, bring me piffle.* We'd cycle off.

Years later, our mother abroad with new husband,
we'd visit her nursing home, say *are you lonely here?*
No dears, I'm never lonely, I have my poets with me
then recite favourite lines by Shakespeare, Milton,
Wordsworth, all learned by heart many decades before:
Earth has not anything to show more fair . . .
Shall I compare thee to a Summer day . . .

Now, ten years older than my Gran was then,
I remember her words, *have all I need . . .*
poems to read, write, review with friends,
my sister nearby, bed-bound but we share
smiles, kind words, kisses. Today I swim in
the sunny harbour, dry off in Bear Hug robe
go home, pick up a thriller, my kind of *piffle.*

Clothes Our Mother Wore

Even during 'The Emergency'
when utility clothes were
simple fabrics, darker colours
our mother wore them well.

I remember nineteen forty nine
the New Look was all the fashion
she bought a long blue skirt
that showed off her slim figure.

A year later she remarried
wore a pink and grey soft
tweed outfit, silk-trimmed
hat, she looked a picture.

On their small dairy farm
fetching cows, churning butter
feeding geese, hens, ducks,
she never looked dowdy

and when I was coming to stay
she would call me to say
Please bring a dress, Rosy
I've invited friends to meet you.

Dear Mum, my last memories, you
in your flowery flannel nightgown
me at your hospital bedside
your words of love, your smile.

Our Mother's Prayers

She fuels the kitchen range to boil water
tips it on clothes in a deep stone sink
rubs them with sunlight soap on a glass board
calls us to mangle, hang clothes on the line;

this is on Mondays when for lunch
there's soup and Sunday left-overs
other days, fish, shepherd's pie, Irish stew
with semolina or rice pudding for afters.

In the evenings she plays the piano
singing Shakespeare's dream songs and
Moore's melodies for Gran, who loves
familiar lyrics, our mother's versions.

When we move to the farm in Tomhaggard
we bring in Friesian cows together,
name them Daisy, Blossom, Ragwort,
in the dairy we separate milk, churn butter.

At the head of an oak table she settles
her will, Daniel O'Neill's oil paintings
two girls with long necks for my sister,
reed stooks in a wild landscape for my wall.

She contemplates children, grandchildren,
wonders who will inherit her night prayers
which go on for ever. *We say, surely
you will bring those with you to heaven.*

Our Late Father – Cecil Morreau

My father, died suddenly in 1939 aged 33, when I was nine months old. My mother, because she was struggling to manage her shock and sadness, was reluctant ever to talk about him so this account is piecemeal like the way I learned about him. In those days bereavement was not supported for parent or children, just something else you got on with. Mum's way was to deny sadness and address her life with courage and optimism. I think my brother, who was four at the time, needed support. It took a while and a friend's insistence for her to tell Patrick that Daddy had died. When I asked her years later why she never talked about our father, except to say he was a wonderful man and their marriage was a very happy one, she replied she didn't want us to feel sorry for ourselves not having a father. I think his absence and her silence about him was a major feature of our upbringing and affected all our lives in different ways although neither Mummy nor we were aware of this at the time. I think It would have been healthier for us, and maybe for our mother as well, to have talked openly about him.

Cecil was the middle child, the eldest went into the family business while he and his younger sister went to University. He gained a double first at Cambridge in engineering and architecture. He was also a hockey blue. In 1928 he went to work as an architect with Thomas Worthington and partners, where he was much respected. Later Cecil worked for the Architects' Department of the London County Council.

His mother, Alice Morreau, neé Weinman, grew up with her two sisters in Brittany but moved to Germany when she married Mark Morreau. They moved to Manchester and set up their business there in the early 1900s. She told us she was French and often spoke French to our mother. We grew up believing Daddy was an English Protestant with French parents. Our surname Morreau was surely a French name. As a child in a local Irish convent school, speaking with a slightly English accent, always feeling a little different but anxious to fit in with my friends, I kept quiet about Daddy. We were Irish Catholics, Mass every Sunday, confession on Saturday, fish on Friday etc. I worried for Daddy's soul, prayed for him every night.

When I was 18 and staying in London with Alice's younger sister, Berthe Goetz, she told me how her husband died of a broken heart when the Nazis confiscated his business and left them without a livelihood. She also talked of our relatives who died in the camps and others she helped to escape to England. *But you are French not Jewish* I remonstrated, *Momma told us and we have a French name.* I was wrong, both my father's parents were relatively prosperous Ashkenazi Jews whose ancestors, Levis, wine-growers in Bohemia, had migrated from there because of pogroms. In the late eighteenth century. Germany, especially Berlin, was more tolerant of Jews than many countries in Europe.

Some years ago a cousin asked me to write a forward to a book he'd written about a street in Mainz where some of our relations had lived – **Jews in Kaiserstrasse, Mainz, Germany 1939** by Michael Philips. Most residents were Jewish and were murdered in Nazi concentration camps.

About thirty years later, staying at my sister's house in Co Wicklow, I mentioned how strange it was that Mum never told us Daddy was Jewish. We were sitting round her dinner table with her grown-up children. She was surprised, asked me how I knew, then called her husband: *Rosy just told me Daddy and all his family were Jewish, not French as we grew up believing. Did you know?* He replied, *Yes I always knew and, when I asked to marry you, Cicely made sure I did.*

Photograph

Taken before I was born
my father looks forward
he foresaw the war, signed
up with the Sappers in 1939
but died the April before.

I was nine months old
so many things they never
told us, he was a silence
in our lives.

Sweethearts in Manchester
my mother an Irish Catholic
Daddy's profile Jewish
Gran blessed their union.

You have a look of your father
my friend tells me; I wish
I'd grown up with him, lift
the photo from its frame
discover Mum's printed words

THE BEST OF THE BUNCH

* see page 17. to view photograph

Who are we . . .

We are the children whose fathers died early killed in wars fought all over the world or by infections, TB, influenza.

We grew up in houses where women managed on meagre incomes to hold us together mothers and grans whose words we obeyed.

Stories of fathers filtered through slowly, strange words like *Auschwitz*, *Hiroshima*, the *London Blitz*. We never knew were they Irish, French, Jewish

so we stayed silent when asked in our classes for father's permission or his place of birth.

We Three – Patrick, Mary and Rosy Morreau

Patrick, born in August, 1934, was the eldest and the only boy. In this he was set slightly apart from Mary, born 1936 and myself, born 1938. Polly Devlin in her beautiful book *All of us There* describes how siblings weave their lives around each other in a kind of positional dance, always aware of their relationships with each other and with the parents. I think this is true of us three both in our interactions which, despite childhood teasings and differences, have always been bonded in love and close friendship, and our relations with our mother, feeling protective of her since we were very young. However it may be because Mum threatened to come back and haunt us if we didn't get on!

Patrick was the most daring and adventurous of us children and showed great initiative from an early age. Until his voice broke it was very like our mother's and he used to ring his school, St Conleth's, Ballsbridge, saying *It's Mrs Morreau speaking, I'm sorry Patrick is unwell and won't be coming to school today*, then set off in his school blazer and cap which, as soon as he was out of sight, he'd bundle into his satchel and join the local builder Mr MacAllister, whose workshop was just down the road, on his handyman rounds. At home time he'd put his uniform back on and return. Mum only found out when she happened to meet Mr MacAllister one day and he remarked on how helpful Patrick was but was surprised how often his school closed for the day.

During the long summer holidays Patrick and his friend Michael Perrot would organise adventures, mainly trespassing in nearby properties. Mary and I would be brought along as look-outs. Although we were scared all the time we weren't going to refuse the big boys. We had a long thin garden leading to the back of De Valera's, then Taoiseach's, big estate. His front gate was on Cross Avenue at right angles to Merrion Avenue where we lived. We passed there every Sunday on the way to Mass in Booterstown Church and gardaí were posted outside the gate. We got in the back way and crept towards the house. Mary was stationed behind one tree and me another with instructions to make owl noises if anyone came by while Patrick and Michael explored. All went well but on the way home I slipped on the muddy edge of the duck pond, fell right in, was sucked down. I heard

Patrick say *she's a goner* which was also my view. Michael pulled me out and we arrived back in our kitchen. Strangely no adult asked how I'd got so wet and smelly and we wouldn't have told. Our bedroom window looked across Dev's land and a red light shone into the room. I was convinced it was his Garda looking for the child who'd disturbed his ducks and he'd come and arrest me.

Patrick always had a clever sense of humour and a quick tongue. Also unlike most children he knew what he was going to do when he grew up – build bridges. He became a very successful structural engineer working with leading architects in USA and London. In 1946 he went away to boarding school in Yorkshire, Ampleforth College, a leading Catholic boys' schools run by Benedictine monks. Our house seemed rather empty without him and although he came home for holidays he already seemed more grown up.

Mary and I were always called *the little girls* or by one family friend *the giggling girls*. In the house we used to do everything together, make all the beds, dust the rooms, mangle and hang out clothes on Monday wash day, fetch the messages and then we were free to go out and play, calling for friends on the way to the swimming baths. Mary was more practical and responsible than me, I was quite introverted and happy to have my head in a book. We weren't allowed to read in the mornings except Sunday breakfast times. We had a lot of fun together out on our bikes, in and out of friends' houses. We even enjoyed our time in junior school, Sion Hill Dominican Convent, five minutes walk from our home.

When we were five and six our doctor referred us to St Michael's Hospital, Dun Laoghaire to have our tonsils and adenoids out. I can't remember the reason, the operation was almost routine in those days. We were sat in a row outside the operating theatre. The girl before us went in, we heard screams, looked at each other, decided she was a cry baby. Mary was next, more screams, oh dear if my brave big sister was suffering how could I survive. My turn, the surgeon said he was going to put some sweet-smelling perfume over my nose, I smiled up at him and this pad of sickly chloroform was clamped onto my face. The next thing I knew I was waking up in a tiny room, Mary was in the only bed and I was in a cot far too small for

me, so uncomfortable and humiliating - five years old in a cot! We suffered through the week with sore, raw throats, lumpy food and little attention. We were very relieved when Mum was finally allowed to visit and bring us home.

During our junior school years above all we wanted to be in the sea. On Sundays, after Mass, Mummy would take the three of us on the steam train from Blackrock to Killiney, an adventure in itself. Mum would read her newspaper on the beach while Mary and I spent hours in the waves and Patrick hired a rowing boat. I would be called out before Mary as I was blue in the face and shivering. *But I'm b-b-b-boiling*, I'd complain. We brought jam sandwiches with us and when we were all dressed we'd walk to the cafe on the beach, marked with a big TEAS, for hot drinks.

During the long summer holidays we'd call for our friends and go to Blackrock and Dun Laoghaire Baths. These were both sea water baths and you could climb over their walls, swim in the sea then back into the baths. In the school holidays they were always crowded with older boys shoving and ducking us under which was quite scary for small girls. My June birthday present each year was a season ticket to Dun Laoghaire Baths and I'd go there every day on the tram and meet my friend. We'd be in and out of the water most of the day. There was a small cafe where we'd buy HB twopenny wafers after our swims. On my birthday I would treat us both to sixpenny ones, almost too fat for our hands to hold. Sadly both of the swimming baths have been out of use for decades though the tall diving board at Blackrock was a feature of the local landscape until quite recently.

In 1949 Mary went to boarding school to the Holy Child Convent, Harrogate, Yorkshire and I missed her very much. I think this school was chosen because Aunty Jacqueline was a Holy Child nun so we got some reduction of our fees. Killiney was the only Holy Child school in Ireland and at that time was very small with no sixth form. Mary liked school and excelled in all the sports, eventually becoming captain of lacrosse and tennis teams. However, when she came home for her first summer holidays she realised all the tennis tournaments were already underway and her Sion Hill friends were otherwise occupied. A year later I joined her in Harrogate, we two young girls age thirteen and twelve were seen onto the boat at North Wall,

Dublin, usually by Mum and John Sheridan, and somehow managed, with our trunks, to disembark at Liverpool, catch a train at Lime Street, change trains at Leeds and get a taxi from Harrogate station to the convent. That first term I felt very shy and self-conscious. We were meant to curtsy to any nun we passed, to slide one foot behind the other and bow our heads. I could never get it right so used to huddle in a corner till the nun went past. When I came home for Christmas holidays, longing to see my Sion Hill friends, they had all joined the girl guides and were speaking another language. I was very sad to lose friends of six years in one short term. I've had a grudge against the girl guides ever since.



Blackrock Baths

Long after the sea water baths
were left to fall apart, the high
diving board stands in three tiers
like a wedding cake left for years.

Every day of long summer holidays,
togs rolled in towels, we'd call for
friends on the way to swim and play
in these baths for hours on end.

Eddie Heron, Olympic diver, came
every year. All us children stayed up late
to watch him knife, twist, somersault,
clean break the water to roaring cheers.

There were none to compare but
day after day brave girls and boys
climbed to the top board, dived
trying for Eddie's manoeuvres.

Sisterland

Mary and Rosy, *little giggling girls*,
summers in Blackrock Baths
steam train to Killiney Beach,
two trams to Dublin Zoo.

We helped the elephant keeper
scrub Sarah with pumice stone
I was standing at her rear-side
when she stepped back on my toe.

Bike rides to the RDS
change our library books and Gran's
who recited poems and speeches
of Shakespeare, Shelley, Milton

yet asked us to bring her *piffle*
detectives of her era
Lord Peter Wimsey, Albert Campion
Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot.

Now we are in our eighties
living almost next door
looking out for one another
as my sister's memory fades.

Our Big Brother

im Patrick Morreau

Only yesterday you called me:
your father, my big brother
passed away, taken ill
following cancer surgery.

I walk along the sea wall
gusts of wind unbalance me,
one rock pokes up like a seal's head
disappears underwater.

Still in shock I wonder
how can our world go on
without this wonderful man
who takes care of everyone.

Our Family Prop and Stay – Mrs Mary Breen

After we moved into Beechcroft, I think our mother must have advertised for a cook/housekeeper because one day the doorbell rang and a woman came in. She was not good-looking, her hair pulled back in a bun, round black framed glasses, hairs growing from her chin, but we found out she was good-hearted with a wicked sense of humour and ready chuckle. Having listened to what Mum had to say she decided we'd suit her and arranged when to start work. Mum said she felt that Mrs Breen was interviewing her rather than the other way round.

Breenie, as we came to call her, moved into the little room between the one I shared with Mary and the one Patrick shared with our cousin John Sheridan, and occupied the kitchen. Mary and I moved into the kitchen after school, did our homework there, and were then allowed to cook, so long as we washed up. Breenie was always on our side and was very fond of all our family. She even managed to laugh when Patrick one day decided to cut off her bun. She didn't even let Mum tell him off for this transgression.

We knew little of her life before she came to us but gradually pieced some information together. She had worked at a sausage factory and, having seen what went into them, warned us against ever eating sausages. Her family home was Wexford and she always bought the weekly newspaper, The Wexford Free Press. We would tease her, how could it be free when she paid money for it? She never talked about or went to visit relatives there. She asked to have Fridays as her day off when she used to go to a church in Gardiner Street for her devotions. She had a horror of the drink, was very cross when Patrick, aged about sixteen came home one night, drink taken. I remember, years after, a friend of my step father was visiting with my mother. Breenie went into the room and took away the whiskey bottle. Soon after Mac the friend, a known drinker, left. Eventually we learned she had one son who'd gone to London, started drinking and died there age twenty-one.

Her only relative, who came to our house, was Cassie, her niece, a confectioner. She was a very bonny and cheerful young woman who taught Mary and me to make cakes, always mixing ingredients by hand. Breenie was

very wise in a no-nonsense way and a good friend to all of us especially my mother. When, in 1956, my stepfather and mother were moving from Dublin to a little farm in Tomhaggard, Co Wexford, she was reluctant to leave her Church and familiar surroundings, did not want to see her relations who had cast her out and left her to fend for herself when she was pregnant, never asked after her or her son, but in the end she agreed to go with them.

She was able to advise our mother and stepfather about country ways, the care of animals and poultry, separating milk, churning butter. We three had left home by then but she was always asking for news of Mary's family, my studies at Trinity College, Patrick's work and family in California, what was Mr Collett doing on the farm. In her last years she suffered from Parkinson's disease and Mum was pleased to be able to nurse her in their home. She died in October 1960, her funeral was the day of my finals and our family decided I shouldn't be told of Breenie's demise and funeral until I'd finished my exams. I'm sad I didn't have that chance to say goodbye and thank her for her care, courage and humour.

Dear Breenie . . .

always making room for us
as we ran in from school and laid
our homework on the kitchen table
finished the tasks, cleared books away.

We helped her put out treats she'd made,
dripping toast, barm brack, scones
with golden syrup or plum jam
cups of tea, laughter, stories.

We missed her on Fridays, her day off
for devotions in her Gardiner Street Church
where she prayed, above all for her son
who'd died in London aged only twenty-one.

A Slaney woman she used to buy
the Wexford Free Press every week;
we teased her *How can you say it's free
when you pay money for it?*

When my mother and stepfather
bought a small farm in Tomhaggard
we thought Breenie would be pleased
going back to her roots, near family

but she demurred – her kin never
wanted her once she got pregnant
sent her away, never asked how
she and her son were coping.

She moved with my mother, firm
friends they were, and Breenie knew
the country ways, showed Mum how
to handle hens, ducks, geese

bring in cows, churn butter, other chores;
Mum's first time on a farm, in her fifties
she loved it all and used to say *I think
I've died and gone to heaven.*

Breenie chuckled in her wicker chair beside
the aga; she was the warm heart of the farm.



Our Cousin - John Sheridan

John is my mother's younger cousin. His father, Nicholas Sheridan, was a solicitor in Dundalk and Martin O'Flanagan's step cousin. It was to his family home Mummy brought the three of us when we first came to Ireland on the first of September 1939, the day World War Two broke out. He joined up in the Royal Air Force as soon as he was old enough and, after the war, he came to Dublin to work in Irish Dunlop. He lived in our family house during the week and went home to his mother in Ravensdale near Dundalk, at weekends. I remember the days when he cycled from Merrion Avenue into Lower Abbey Street to sign in work by 9am. In later years he became Sales Manager then Service Manager and finally Managing Director of Irish Dunlop.

Having him live in our house was great for Mary and me. All his life, even in his eighties, he loved to play games, any games. We'd greet him when he got back from work, take the rugby and soccer balls out into the back garden, pass them, run with them, shoot goals. We'd play French cricket or just run around doing cartwheels and handstands. In the winter it would be Pick-a-Sticks and Racing Demon on the floor then, after supper, the formal games of bridge with Gran. John was always good-natured and seemed to enjoy the fun and games as much as we did. He must have felt tired after a day's work but rarely showed it. In our household, all women when Patrick was at boarding school, it was very good for us to have a benevolent older male cousin living with us. John played rugby with Wanderers Rugby Club and we'd sometimes go and watch his matches. Mum hated heights but struggled up the stand. We loved to watch and loudly cheer on John and his team.

In 1949 Richard Flanagan, Mum's first cousin, then Managing Director of Irish Dunlop so John's boss, in a saga I'll recount in the next chapter, insisted John move out of our home. He moved down the road to Waltham Terrace and although he had a good landlady he was very distressed and had a breakdown. I used to visit him at his breakfast-time every morning, with my togs rolled up in the towel, on my way to meet my friend in Dun Laoghaire swimming baths.

We all loved John, Gran, Mum, Breenie as well as us children. He was a link between the generations. Breenie prided herself on scrambling his eggs just the way he liked them. She also chuckled to see him with a tea towel over his arm, standing in front of the range, as she was washing up. The tea towel never dried any crockery. She also used to leave dishes to drain so as not to wear out the cloth, advice I still gladly follow.

John and Mum got on very well, she was like an older sister to him, listening to his stories from work and play, also his feelings about women he dated especially one who lived in England but used to come and stay with us. We really liked her, her name was Mary Boville but we used to call her *Mary Bovril*. After all these confidences Mum was very surprised when he asked her for her daughter Mary's hand in marriage. He was thirty, Mary eighteen, but they both wanted to get married and had a lovely wedding the following April, 1956. Mum was a bit embarrassed when the banns were read out, *Mary Morreau of 63 Merrion Avenue and John Sheridan of 63 Merrion Avenue*. In those days it was not done to share a home before marriage and the congregation would not know they only shared Mary with her sister and John with our brother.

John was a great family man. He and Mary had five children, eighteen grandchildren and he related closely to all of them. He also welcomed me and the family. When I retired from work in London and was living in Myrtle Cottage down the road from their house, he would often ask Mary to call me and invite me up to play bridge with them and their son Anthony, who was living with them at that time. Our games were very informal and noisy, Gran would have told us *whisht*.

Towards the end he had some black moments but we, Mary and I, were very touched when he wrote the letter/poem *Dear Rose* for us. He died peacefully at home, their family doctor and Mary on either side. Anthony, holding his hand. He exclaimed that he saw a bright light just before he passed.

Dear Rose

by John Sheridan

your sweet message reached me
in one of my darkest hours, helped
bring light, relieve my sadness.

The rest of my dark hours are
handled with so much thought, care
and kindness by your sweet sister

that I'm almost able to think kindly
of this world of ours again so now I pen
a reply to your greeting:

*young wings flew the little bird
away to pastures other, she returns
close to family homes.*

*We no longer play jacks or pick-a-sticks
instead spend time laughing, lolling,
excursions in the woods, strolling.*

Edited by Rosy Wilson
24th April 2021, John's birthday

Our Mother's Cousin - Richard Flanagan

Richard was Mummy's first cousin and a very dominant figure in our household. His mother was Martin's sister, Mary Kate O'Flanagan, and his father Pat Flanagan, who was born in the West of Ireland but was a civil servant in Birmingham at the time of Richard's birth. Mary Kate used to refer to her husband as *that peasant*. Richard had several brothers, Gerard who was a priest, John who was an established artist and Maurice, and one sister Molly who married Louis Allen. John and Molly hung out in Bohemian circles in the Chelsea area of London. John and the famous singer, actress and film star, Dame Gracie Fields, were lovers who spent many years in Capri where she died and was buried in September 1979. Richard went to work in Dunlop's tyre factory in Birmingham, he was quickly promoted and in the years we knew him he was Managing Director of Irish Dunlop, situated in Lower Abbey Street, Dublin. The factory was in Cork.

Cousin Richard, as we called him, was the only person we knew with a car, a Humber Super Snipe. Very often it was driven by his chauffeur, Jackson, who wore a shiny peak cap and was always pleasant with us. Richard, his wife Molly and two sons, Michael, who became a psychiatrist and was rather aloof, and Johnny, who became an engineer, lived in Granite Lodge, a large rather austere house in Upper Glenageary Road. Johnny was always very kind to Patrick, Mary and me when we visited their home.

Richard was very fond of our mother, always wanted her to help entertain business friends and people from the arts scene in Dublin: Cyril Cusack, Siobhan McKenna and Lennox Robinson were visitors he brought to our home. As a widow Mum was often lonely in Dublin and Richard courted her though they were first cousins and he was married. He'd come to Beechcroft in the evenings and she would ask Gran to stay up till he left. Gran would say *I'm going to bed now Richard so I'll see you out*, and she escorted him to the front door.

He would also invite Cicely for private lunches in the best Dublin hotels, the Russell or the Shelbourne. Again Mum didn't want to be alone with him as he got romantic over coffee and fine chocolates so she always invited Mary and me to join them about two o'clock. We would turn up in our

usual grey shorts and blue aertex shirts. Richard had to ask us to sit with them and a waiter would wheel up the dessert trolley. Mary and I had our choice of delicious puddings. Richard would leave soon after, rather disconsolately.

Up to the age of twelve I think Richard was the only adult man of Mum's generation I knew and what a complex person he was.

Although he was born in England and retired there for his last years, he supported Irish Nationalism and was influential in my choosing to become an Irish citizen when I was sixteen years old. Mum had an Irish passport as Martin O'Flanagan was born in Ireland so I was entitled to one even though I was born in England. This is the only passport I've ever held. I continue to hold it proudly.

In the summer of 1949 our mother met Harry Collett at a mutual friend's house. They fell in love and got engaged. Harry was working in the Sudan but they planned to marry in 1950 when he was home on leave. When Mum told Richard this he was furious. He came to Beechcroft, Mary and Patrick were at boarding school by then so I was the only child at home. I brought in their tea and biscuits and went out again. Then the shouting began. I'd never before heard a grown man lose his temper and bully a woman and felt very upset and shocked. The plan had been that Richard would give me a lift into Dublin. Mum made me go with him though, after all that drama, this was last thing I wanted to do. We were silent all the way into town. As I got out of the car Richard gave me an orange ten shilling note, more money than I had ever received, even on birthdays. When I got home on the number seven tram both Mum and John Sheridan were very sad. Richard had given an ultimatum, if he wasn't welcome in our home then *that young whippersnapper John Sheridan* couldn't live there either. He would have to choose between his job and his home. So John had to move out and though he was nearby he became depressed. I had a premonition that our happy years in Beechcroft were coming to an end.

Richard was a very clever man but also manipulative and controlling, not only of our family but also of his sister Molly Allen's life. Molly's younger daughter, Stephanie and I re-united in London in the 1980s becoming close

friends. We exchanged several Richard stories. At work colleagues admired his brilliance but feared his distant and powerful personality. When I was at university, at Trinity College Dublin, he used to invite me to Granite Lodge to spend the evening with Johnny and his friends where Richard would orchestrate learned discussions on literature, politics, religion. I would feel self-conscious being so much younger and the only woman but I also enjoyed the conversations.

John Flanagan and his wife settled in London in the 1980s after working on big engineering projects in Africa, Egypt and the USA. He was present at my brother's wedding in Berkeley, California. Both my brother and I were living and working in London with our families and we all used to meet up for meals, family gatherings and events. John also visited Mary and me in Dalkey, Co Dublin, where we retired to in our eighties, and climbed Killylinny Hill. He also used to buy six copies of each of my poetry collections, which he sent to his friends. He is a benevolent big cousin. He puts his longevity down to a nightly tot of Irish whiskey.

Our Stepfather – Harry Collett

In 1949 Harry brought his mother to Ireland for a visit which changed all our lives. Mummy had a very good friend, Mrs Burton, who was blind. She lived with a companion in Foster Avenue and entrusted Mum to help with her correspondence and be her confidante. We were all very fond of her. She often talked of her son Bill who fought in the British Army during World War Two. He survived the war but died two years later, the result of mistreatment and near starvation in German prison camps. Harry was Bill's best friend during the war and in the camps. For this reason he wanted to visit with Mrs Burton. Our mother was invited to join them and help prepare the meal.

Bill and Harry had taken part in a mass tunnel escape from one prisoner of war camp only to be recaptured and sent to Colditz. The Chronicle of the escape includes the lines, *Harry Collett and Bill Burton, silent men and very strong*. This POW camp escape became the inspiration for the blockbuster film, *The Great Escape*. Colditz, also glamorised in movies, was a cruel incarceration, without Red Cross parcels men would have starved to death. Harry told me the friendships he made and *the bloody silly pranks we got up to* allowed him to keep going.

After the war Bill suggested Harry joined him and his brother at work for the Sudan Gezira Board which he did. The Sudan, then known as the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, lies South of Egypt on the African Continent. The Capital is Khartoum and a short distance north, in the old city Omdurman, is the confluence of the White and Blue Nile Rivers. The Gezira Scheme is one of the largest irrigation schemes in the world. Water is diverted from the Blue Nile through a system of canals and ditches to tenant farmers over an area of 4,300 kilometers between the Blue and White Niles. This was designated a cotton growing area. In Harry's time of working there, 1946 to 1955, no Europeans were allowed to own land but they were employed to manage groups of tenant farmers. In 1955 all these jobs were Sudanised. He was working there when he came on leave to Ireland.

Harry's father studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, part of University College London. After graduation he worked as a commercial artist. Very

sadly for Harry he died when his only son was ten years old. His mother took work as a companion to wealthier ladies and Harry went to Mount St. Mary's, a harsh Jesuit boarding school. He worked for a year in London then emigrated to Australia where, over the years, he grew bananas, cut down trees, rode horses and wrote and read children's stories on radio. He returned to London ten years later in 1938 and a year after, when World War Two was declared, joined the British Army, first with the Yorkshire Hussars, a Cavalry regiment, as he loved horses. However he found this regiment too straitlaced and posh. He transferred to the Commandos which attracted men from all backgrounds. He was wounded with shrapnel and captured at the Battle of Crete in summer 1941. He spent the rest of the war in prisoner of war camps. A photo of him after release shows a haggard, emaciated figure.

Although Harry and Mummy met only briefly that evening, he spent a lot of the next two weeks at Beechcroft talking to Mum and Gran, playing tennis with Mary and me in our garden, taking Mum out. When he returned to the Sudan blue airmail forms addressed to Mrs Morreau came every week. It transpired that they got engaged in that short time on his leave, hence the furore with Richard and John's banishment. No one told me anything though, aged eleven, I would understand and it was clear changes were about to take place. I liked Harry and would have been pleased he was joining our family.

Harry next came on leave the autumn of 1950. Our mother and some of Daddy's family living in England had arranged a wedding in Farm Street Catholic Church, London. Patrick was invited to give Mummy away. Mary and I, now both at Holy Child Convent, Harrogate, Yorkshire, were not invited. On the day, Mother Augusta, our austere but sensible headmistress, called Mary in and asked her, *Isn't your mother getting married today? Aren't you and Rosalind going to the wedding?* Mary always felt hurt that we were not included. As the youngest I guess I didn't expect much.

Harry was very fond of his *three prefabs*, the way he introduced us to his friends. After a short visit to Yorkshire to see us and Patrick, he and Mum went to the Sudan. Then a letter came asking *one, two or three like to come for Christmas?* The Sudan Government paid for children to travel on

reindeer flights for a month at Christmas. Of course we all three wanted to escape our freezing cold boarding schools and fly into the sun. It was a wonderful adventure and we were very spoilt with breakfast picnics by the Nile, games at the Club, tea with the local Imam, Omdah Eis, big welcomes from European families and Sudanese people. But that is another story.



Harry

We've come to the churchyard
planted flowers on your grave
now make our way to Orford Quay

where every day, even when gales
blew in off the North Sea,
you used to journey

bent almost at right angles to your stick,
stiff, aching, shrapnel still in your back,
you'd sink onto a bench

with Mick, your companion,
beside you on a long leash,
too old to pull the way he once did.

In this shelter facing Havergate,
island of green and red shanks, avocets,
knots, dunlins, terns, godwits,

we discover your form,
hold you there.

Visit

One year after her funeral,
three from his, my brother
and I visit their grave.

First we stop at the Walled Garden,
search out shrubs hardy enough
for Orford Churchyard

then carry, as offerings to ancestors,
white-flowered hebe, violet pansies,
borrow a trowel from neighbours,

plant, heel and water them in.
Beside the sandstone we say a prayer
That they were getting along.

In Memoriam

I walk up Carraigoona, place three stones
a round rock for my mother, streaked with iron,
believing her depression's overcome
and she is once more laughing in the rain.

My father's flint is flat and smoothly formed
beside her rock; he died too young, three
children under four - I wonder whether
they're together now.

For Harry I lay a multi-coloured pebble
wish him free of pain and kinder to her
certain that he'll be dependable
missing his timely humour.

I talk to my three parents for a while, leave
their stones with gorse flowers on the hill.



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