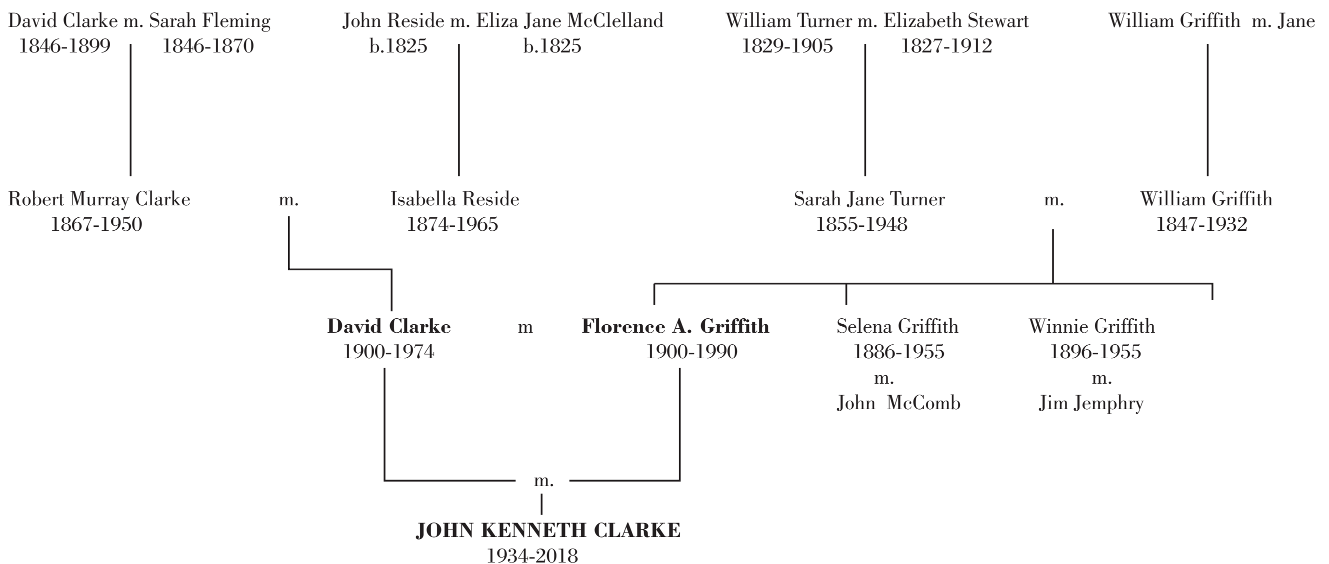
"Random Tales Of My Early Life"

By John Clarke

In the late 1990's John Clarke, who had lived in Australia for almost forty years, contacted the Society with some notes on his early years in Poyntzpass. He was encouraged to expand on his 'Memoirs' with a view to publication in our journal. However, we never heard any more from him until recently, when through the good offices of his cousin, Alan Clarke, we were made aware that John had indeed greatly expanded on his original notes. We are extremely grateful to Alan for making us aware of this and for his work in editing John's original manuscript and providing us with the following and the illustrations included.

From John Clarke's Family Tree



The Griffiths – My Mother's Family

The Griffith family lived about halfway up Railway Street. Willie Griffith, my grandfather, had a ladies drapery shop and a separate gents' one. He employed cobblers, sold shoes, employed ladies and gents' tailors, dealt in all sorts of livestock, bought wool and owned and rented out several houses adjacent to where he lived. His brother Eddie was in the grocery trade just across the street. All but one of his children were female and several emigrated to the USA or Australia. Three Griffith sisters - Flo (Clarke), Winnie (Jemphry) and Lena (McComb) - stayed in Poyntzpass.

John Clarke's Parents' House and Shop

Jemphry's House and Shop

Winnie lived across the street from us in the original Griffith home. This had a large yard, many outhouses, a huge garden, and several acres of pasture for cattle; it also had a small river running through it.

When Winnie married Jim Jemphry, my mother moved to live across the street and took on the ladies' drapery shop. She called it 'The Arcade' which I now think was a bit pretentious. She lived above the shop, as did my father after they married

I was much helped and influenced by Winnie and Jim. Their son Ted was like a brother, and we had the run of the house and grounds. Jim talked to me about many things which were of no interest to my father, so I picked up a lot from him and from Winnie. It is impossible to exaggerate how important they were in my life; my mother had little time to talk, and Dad's only interest was farming. Indeed, Dad never left the village and as he saw it, he could not do so because of farm commitments to hens, cattle, cows etc.

Jim was an accountant and a gentleman farmer (at least as far as you can be a gentleman farmer with 7 or 8 acres). Winnie, like her father, was a great businessperson and was universally liked.

During the depression years, most of the Jemphry businesses were unprofitable. Willie had helped his children financially, employed quite a few people (over a dozen at one time) and was deep in debt. Jim looked at the books in detail and found that money was being lost in all the businesses which had employees. He persuaded Willie to dismiss the tailors and cobblers. This must have been a painful time for all concerned.

The two profitable parts of the business were the gents' outfitters (minus the tailors) and the wool business; Winnie took over both. In time the debts were reduced and paid off.

About 1939, Jim persuaded Winnie to give up the gents' outfitters shop. It was let to Mr. Watt who still ran it as a gents' outfitters, and as a shoe shop. This allowed Winnie to devote herself to the wool business.

Winnie and Wool

Winnie bought wool in many parts of Northern Ireland and in some nearer parts of the South. She had good connections with the wool trade in Bradford and could sell there directly. This cut out a middleman and allowed her to offer a halfpenny per pound (of wool) more than any competitor. By 1939, she had become the biggest buyer in Northern Ireland. She told me years later that she never went into a farm to buy wool without coming out having bought it. I expressed surprise, doubt even, and asked her if she just bid more until she got it.

"No," she said. She had one price and it would have ruined her reputation had she paid farmers different prices. No farmer would have forgiven her for paying him less than his neighbour. "Did they all want to sell then?" I asked. "No, some didn't want to sell". "How then" I asked, "did you buy the wool?" "I just kept talking to them till they changed their mind" she said.

When the war started the Government requisitioned all wool but contracted all the previous wool buyers to collect it on their behalf. The dealers were paid a commission but did not need to use their own money.

Winnie needed help in handling wool when she went around the country buying it since it was loaded on to a truck and brought back to Poyntzpass. I was often involved in this collection, but she mainly used the McVeigh 'boys' - Tommy, Joe and Jim. I think that Tommy might have been her favourite; he was always ready for anything. Tommy accompanied her on the trips when she talked the farmers into selling. Those who knew Tommy would say that he knew all there was to know about dealing, but Tommy told me that Winnie taught him everything.

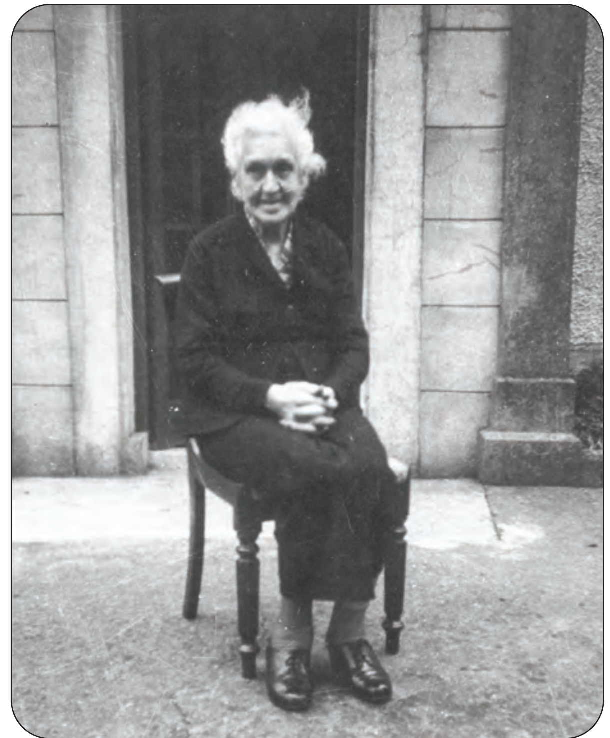
On one occasion, Tommy, Jim and I accompanied Winnie to Killeter, near Castlederg. This was about 1949 when the wool was still being collected by dealers on behalf of the Government. There was usually a long delay in the Government paying up, so Winnie brought along a lot of money. She gave cash advances to the farmers - a sort of short-term loan. Her 'cut' in this was a 'luckpenny' which was given back as a sort of commission for advancing the cash. There was no fixed percentage, but I think hints were dropped. The money involved was shillings but remember that shillings were worth something in those days. It was all a bit of a game.

Winnie always tried to pay the money partly as change. But after some deals, she had only £5 notes left. This was the advance asked for by one woman. I remember her paying it to the woman who took it, thanked her, and walked away saying that it would be a pity to break it. Winnie lost that 'luck penny'.

Jim McVeigh's big problem was the huge 'feeds' placed in front of us by the wife of the man whose yard was hired to collect the wool in. He used to hide some of the food in the many flowerpots to avoid the offence of not eating it all. Eating was no problem for me or Tommy. At night we stayed in Castlederg.

The biggest farmer in Killeter was Eddie Kelly. He had a huge bleak farm which seemed to me at the time to be an endless moorland without fences or trees or buildings. To be caught out there in wind, rain or snow must have been unpleasant. Eddie was a bit of a grumbler. He complained that his wool was never properly graded. Winnie organised to meet him and take him for his first trip to Belfast to talk to the wool board. When asked what he thought of Belfast he said it had *"great shilter"!*.

"Winnie lost that 'luck penny'."



Bella Clarke nee Reside

The Clarkes - My Father's Family

My paternal grandparents were Robert Clarke and his wife Bella, nee Reside. Sometime about the beginning of the First World War, Robert sold his small farm and bought a much bigger one at Aughantaraghan.

They had a big family: Davy (my father), Bessie, Sally, Willa, John, Henry, Isa, Bobby, Tommy and Florrie.

My grandfather's farm needed extra labour but the prevailing attitude to paying wages - to be avoided at all costs! - and the existence of a mortgage made my grandfather insist that my father left school at the earliest possible age - 12, I think. He was the eldest

child, and by all accounts was a good 'scholar' as schoolboys were called in those days. The local head-teacher in Drumbanagher (Mr Griffith) said that he was the cleverest of the family and tried unsuccessfully to reason with my grandfather to let him stay at school longer. But the idea of paying wages to children or indeed any family members working on the farm seldom occurred to farmers, so Davy worked for little monetary reward until he married at age 32, when he received a modest honorarium.

My grandmother's brother John Reside and his wife lived at what later became my father's farm, at Demone, about half a mile from the family farm. Their son was a railway engine driver. At that time (well before WW2) the railways in Argentina were run by the British and he went there to work in a senior capacity with the locals. I remember many carefully preserved letters from Argentina in the roof space at father's farm. After the deaths of both his son and his wife, John moved in with his sister and brother-in-law at Aughantaraghan.

Very few houses had flush toilets in those days and electricity was confined to the village. My grandparents did not get electricity till the 1960s. The Reside house at Demone did have a water supply - a small stream which arose from a little well up the road a bit, on the other side! John Reside stripped to the waist and washed in it each morning - winter or summer. This stream was very reliable and stopped but once in all the 38 years I was familiar with it.

John left his small farm (10 to 15 acres) to my father, and my grandfather Robert gave him the use of two fields, about 5 acres, approached through "Ann's loanin"- never called Ann's lane - a few hundred yards before you reach father's farm. The Demone farm did not have an acceptable house; it had just three rooms and mud floors; throughout my life it was used as a farm building.

The House that Davy and Flo Built

Davy Clarke and Flo Griffith married in 1932, and had five children: John (me), William (Billy), Hazel (who died in infancy from meningitis), Maxwell (Max, who died tragically in his early 20s) and Olive.

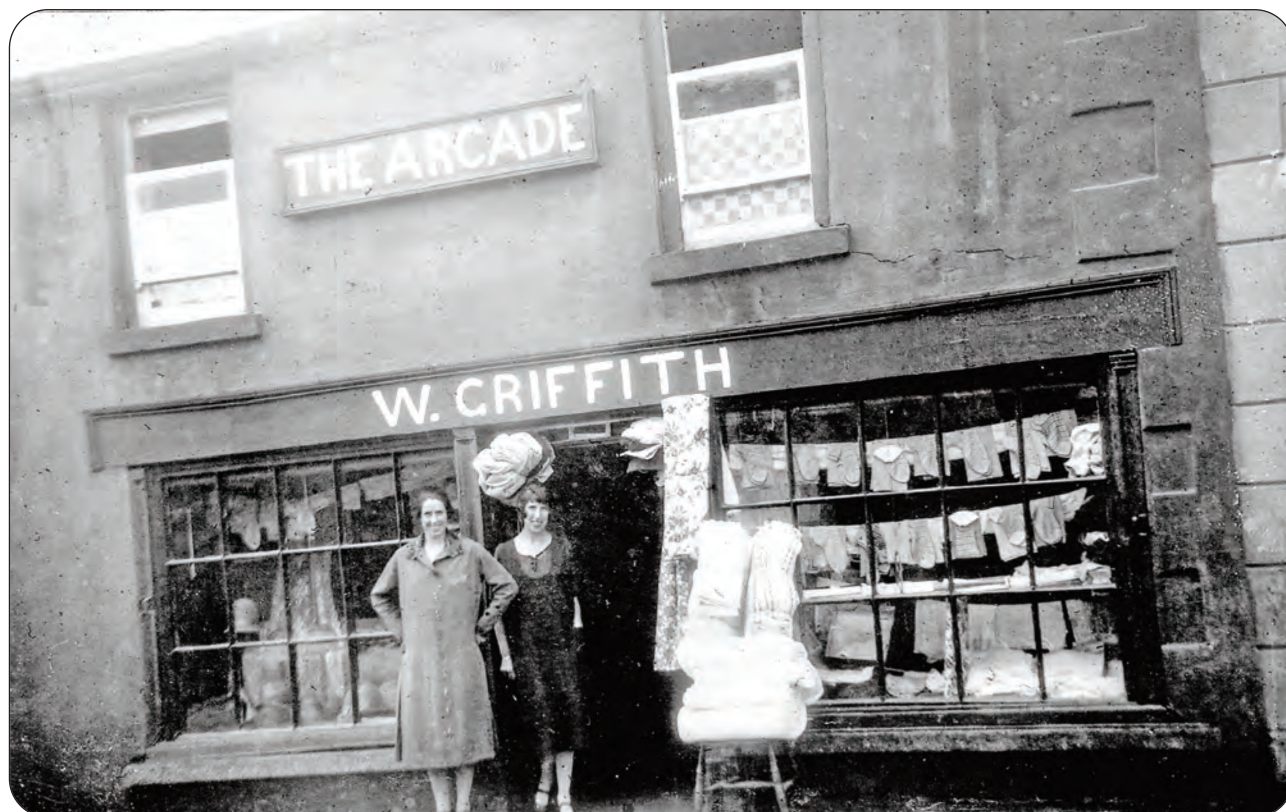
The flat over my mother's ladies' drapery shop was too small for a growing family. There was a very small kitchen on the ground floor at the back and the toilet arrangement was, to put it mildly, unsatisfactory. The toilet was in a shed in the large garden behind the house, but to get to it you had to walk across the neighbour's back yard. There was no water supply to the house or toilet and the toilet contents had to be buried in the garden.

Davy and Flo

The house next door was occupied by an old woman called Biddie Lynch. When she died the house was auctioned, and it was of great importance that we bought the house. I remember a whispered family story that during the auction my father's nerve collapsed at the price being bid and Jim Jemphrey had to have a word with my father and virtually insist that he buy it.

He demolished it and replaced it with the present pebble-dashed house. The original building was pulled down by Bob Hamilton who was the only builder the Clarkes would use. Just before that time Mr. Watt (one of the few "misters" in Poyntzpass!) helped to draw, in pencil in the 'tunnel' entry to the back of Jemphrey's house, a preview (in the form of a picture, not a plan) of the new house. Bob Hamilton built to that specification using the stones from the demolished house. There was enough stone left over to build several sturdy sheds. My father said that bricks were an unsatisfactory thing to build with because they would not last. Stones would last. Slate is a stone so we had a stone house with a slate roof. The house did last but does not lend itself to easy alterations.

" my father's nerve collapsed at the price "



Winnie and Flo outside The Arcade

The new house was joined internally to the old one so we went from having little space to having six upstairs bedrooms and plenty of downstairs room too. It had a flush toilet upstairs but for many years water had to be pumped to a tank in the roof-space to flush it. Since the pumping was hard work, boys at least were permitted to pee outside to conserve water.

The Shop

In the years when people had no private transport, the shop did reasonably well because people bought locally. In the war years there were many soldiers in military camps around the village and these men bought stuff presumably for wives and girlfriends. This was a brief boom-time. However, stock was in short supply and Mum went occasionally to Dublin on the train to buy and smuggle stuff for sale. She got caught eventually, causing her great embarrassment. The smuggling stopped and the incident was never referred to in the family.

The 1950's were leaner times.

My mother's paddocks were in the opposite direction from my father's farm but close enough to daily bring one or two cows to the outbuildings at the Railway Street house for milking, a task I performed from the age of about six until I left school at 16. Dad milked the cows by hand.

The cows gave enough milk to supply our family and the Jemphreys. There was also enough over to raise two calves. These were kept in one of the sheds behind the house and were fed by using a bucket. I fed the calves while Dad milked the cows. The calves were bedded with hay or straw and at intervals the dung had to be forked manually on to a cart and spread by hand over a field.

Life at home during the school years was not exciting. We played a little handball in a huge court which was then the only sports facility in the village. Catholics and protestants played together and there was no animosity but we went to different schools. I was friendly with several Poyntzpass boys including John Johnston, Billy Harvey, Haddon Morrow. I had a big extended family. Every Sunday we went to the Aughantaraghan farm where all the aunts assembled each weekend.

I did quite a lot of shooting over Grandfather's land and the adjoining farms. There was no problem of access since the Clarkes were well known.

The Clarke family acted as if they were very poor. This can be explained, if not totally excused, by the fact that my grandfather bought a big farm before the depression years and had a big mortgage. Father's brother Bobby also worked for little/no money and eventually the loan was paid off and my grandfather became rich – at least

in Poyntzpass terms! However extreme frugality was a permanent way of life.

"We played a little handball"

Was my childhood underprivileged or overprivileged? I could make a case for either. I had relatives all around me. These included an aunt up the street (McComb) and an aunt and uncle down the street (Henry and Isa) as well as Winnie and my grandparents. I could go just about anywhere and was safe everywhere. I could wander over just about everywhere, especially the farms of my grandfather (a big farm) or those of my father and three or four uncles as well as their neighbours who knew me (and everyone else!) well. There were two lakes and a canal for fishing (eels mainly but pike too) or swimming. I went to a reasonable school and had friends.

I was free to drop in on my grandparents at any time and was treated as part of the furniture. If any of us appeared at mealtime unannounced there was no problem, and there was a huge farm with two big yards to run around. Homemade bread, butter, which I often helped to make, and jam were plentiful despite rationing. Later I used to shoot a lot of rabbits, hares, pigeons and snipe around there.

Farming at Aughantaraghan Under My Grandfather

On looking back at the economics of farming in those days there were two guiding principles:

1. To diversify to a remarkable extent. This ensured that the failure of any one crop or source of income had little effect on the total farm income.

2. At all costs, avoid spending money. Paying wages to a farm worker was regarded as a terrible extravagance which was to be avoided if at all possible. Sons were not paid.

The only time outside help was needed was at thrashing time. This was a communal activity where each farmer helped his neighbours.

In the 1940s my grandparents and their son, my uncle, Bobby lived at the Aughantaraghan farm. Let me describe the harvest of hay and 'corn'. When we said corn we refer to oats since it was then by far the main cereal crop. Oats became ripe for harvest around 15 August.

The crop was cut using a McCormack reaper; it was pulled by two horses and needed two people to work it. One drove the horses – this was the easy bit that I sometimes did. The oat stalks as they were cut fell on an articulated platform just behind the cutting blade and were collected for a few yards until there was enough for a sheaf.

A row of cut corn was called a swathe and a row of workers tied the corn into sheaves. To do this they lifted the loose sheaf, took a handful of stalks from it which was put around the sheaf, twisted the ends together to tighten the sheaf a bit and pushed the loose end under the "belt". This was then a completed sheaf. When the sheaves were tied another swathe was cut.

The sheaves were collected near the end of the day and made into stooks. Stooks were made from four or six sheaves. They were loosely tied at the top to prevent wind from toppling them. The stooks were left for the grain to fully ripen and to dry out. This took a week or two in good weather but often took over a month if it was wet. When dry, the stooks were brought together in the field into small stacks about 8 or 9 feet high. This made the oats safe from more rain. Later the small stacks were taken by horse (later tractor) and cart into the farmyard and put into big stacks until the thrasher came.

Building stacks was a bit of an art form. There were two requirements: the stacks must not fall down and the sheaves, especially the outer ones must be placed at an angle with the inward facing seedheads higher than the outer stalk ends. This is so that rain falling on the outside would run down the outside and not into the center of the stack. The tops of the big stacks were thatched with rushes to minimize the effect of rain.

"Thrashing was a big communal event on farms"

Seed hay - perennial ryegrass - was treated the same way as oats. It was harvested starting around 12 July. But 'loose hay' for fodder was cut in June. It was turned by a tedder until dry. It was then put into small stacks, and these could later be pulled intact on to a flat cart – a hay float - and taken to the farm hayshed.

Thrashing was a big communal event on farms. My earliest memories were of a coal-fired steam engine arriving, pulling the thrashing machine. The thrasher

was placed, the wheels cogged to keep it in place and the engine turned around to face it. A very long belt from the steam engine drove the machine.

Mice and even rats ran out of the corn stacks especially if they had been left untouched for a few months. Shouting, dogs barking and even the odd gunshot were heard when vermin appeared. As a young child, the resultant excitement was the bit I liked best.

Each sheaf was pitchforked up to a platform. A worker (often me when I was a little older) grabbed it, undid the tie and threw it to the thrasher man who fed it into the thrashing hole. There was another sheaf-untier on the top, so sheaves came to the central man, and thus the hole, from both sides.

The oat grain appeared from hoppers and was collected in bags which were sewed up when full. The straw came out of the top back and it was carried into the hayshed and piled to the roof. Every man (this was not women's work) knew his job. I never heard an argument, and it all went like clockwork; it had been done for generations and people had grown into their jobs. My father always collected the grain in sacks and sewed them up neatly. Someone else carried them to a barn.

My grandmother provided lunch (we called it dinner) for all the workers. I forget what food was served for except that there were usually fresh peas (pronounced "pays"). To ensure this, a huge row of peas were always planted in the garden to ensure a supply at the right time.

I must emphasise that the above description is my earliest memories from around 1940 to 1945. Things then started to change; tractors replaced steam and horses, and a 'binder' both cut the oats and tied it into sheaves.

Gran's Role on the Farm

Male and female roles were sharply differentiated in those days. Grandad was the outside man, Grandma looked after the domestic arrangements. However, there were exceptions: Grandma looked after the eggs and the geese. She started with three geese - two geese and a gander - in the spring. The geese were free to roam around and did not need to be fed. They nested anywhere and everywhere, and the challenge was to find their nests and take the eggs. Sometimes they layed on the island in the pond so getting the eggs was a messy business. The eggs were then put under a "clocking" hen which hatched them. This kept the geese laying so that she ended up with about 30 goslings which were reared and sold at Christmas. Of course, at an earlier stage the hens got the surprise of their life when their "chickens" started to swim.

One year, since others were busy, I volunteered to

"Plucking geese is a terrible job"

pluck the lot. Simon Ryan killed them (the squeamish should miss this bit) by putting their neck under a shovel shaft on which he placed his feet and he pulled with all his strength. Plucking geese is a terrible job – they have layers of feathers, and the final down is difficult to get rid of. After 30 geese… never again.

Cows were milked by hand twice a day. The milk was separated from the cream in a separator – what else? This involved turning a handle which took a bit of effort. If you turned it fast enough a bell rang clearly but if you were too slow the bell gave a click. I used to turn the handle but could not slack because of the bell.

The skim milk was fed to the pigs and the cream was put in a huge crock and left to go sour. About twice a week the sour cream was churned by Gran to make butter. The churn was rotated on its pivot till the fat i.e. the butter separated from the buttermilk. I often did the churning, but Gran recovered the butter which came in very soft blobs. It was translucent and light yellow - quite distinguishable from bought stuff - and it was worked with little wooden paddles into pound lumps. Salt was added and if it was too pale some 'butter yellow dye' was added. We called it "country butter".

Billy and John

My Father's Farming

Every year he grew potatoes, mangleworzels (mangels), oats, seed hay and some fast-growing turnips around the potatoes. He kept only a very few hens but sold eggs. He kept sheep - about 20 blackface ewes and a ram. He had some store cattle for fattening. He had a few sows and kept the piglets which were raised for bacon. Each day they had to be fed with meal and the dung removed manually using a wheelbarrow. This meant that Dad could never leave the farm even for a day except in the most extreme emergency. He would not want anyone else looking after the animals. And remember what I said about paying a worker.

My father had almost nothing in the way of farm implements. He used his father's machinery and worked in with his brother Bobby. My father had a pony and cart. This was used to move things around the farm. However, the main thing I remember moving was dung. This had been removed from the pig and cowsheds to a dunghill about 25 yards away. It was left to partly decompose and then moved on to the small cart. The pony then brought it to a field where it was thrown off the cart in lumps all over the field. These lumps were then attacked by myself or Billy and further spread all over the field. It would have been difficult to devise a more inefficient system. But labour was free and the pony was not paid.

Before I leave the subject of inefficiency there was another idiotic system to pointlessly increase work in those days. Cattle could be imported from the Free State (not then the Republic of Ireland) but the only market for them was the Government. However, the Government would not buy them until they were kept in the North for about 8 weeks. Dad never left the farm overnight but there was one annual exception; he went with his brother Bobby by train to buy cattle in Dublin. They went down one day, stayed overnight, and bought cattle early the next day. They then returned and waited by the station which was about 100 yards from home till the cattle were delivered after dark. They were driven a mile to the two farms and then chained in stalls at once. They were fed by hand and the dung cleared manually for 8 weeks. This took much effort, meal, hay and straw and after the time they were in much the same condition as when they arrived. They were then graded by a vet, weighed and bought by the Government. The main interest to us kids was that unlike in the North, sweets were not rationed in the South so Bobby and Dad brought some back with them.

"I should confess that I have a criminal record"

Pheasants

My grandfather as a young man owned the land below my father's farm and across the bog at the bottom. This land belonged to the Robinson family in my time. It is close to Close's domain and Closes employed gamekeepers who helped with the hounds and reared pheasants which were shot by "the gentry". These pheasants came in numbers and fed on the corn and stooks just outside my grandfather's house. He got up one morning very early and got 2 birds with one shot – highly illegal. Soon the gamekeeper arrived. Did he hear a shot? When? Just at daybreak (about 4.00am in summer). No, he was always asleep then. The birds were plucked, eaten and the feathers burned. Grandad reckoned that the feed of pheasants paid for the lost corn.

Years later he was not so lucky. They were cutting corn at "Gillow's" farm, opposite Sam Robinson's farm. They had a helper who remarked on all the pheasants which flew out as the corn got cut. After lunch another pheasant flew out – the helper, not one of the family who would not have dared with Granddad there - had got a shotgun at lunchtime and hidden it until the bird appeared. He shot it and from over the hedge a gamekeeper appeared. Grandad was wild at the unsubtle poacher but also resented a prosecution of his worker. He threatened to sue Closes for all the lost grain if the man was prosecuted. The

John Clarke – Graduation

matter was dropped but the conclusion was – if you want to do a bit of poaching do it with a bit of subtlety and finesse, not in public at midday.

I should confess that I have a criminal record. Sometime around 1960 I bought a shotgun and got a license to shoot rabbits, pigeons etc. (I had always used Granddad's gun for years without a licence). Thinking that I was now all legal I went up towards Markethill to where I was not known and shot a pheasant without a game certificate. The owner was watching, and I was fined a pound. I had to record this on official forms several times, including when I applied for visa to travel to the USA. The tendency to shoot pheasants may be inherited.

My Education

I started school at five. The school, which was almost next door, had two classrooms - one had a mistress and the other had the master, Mr. Harvey. I don't remember the name of the "mistress " but she taught me to read and write within two years and when 8 or so I got to the master's room. He was a man of talents. He loved mathematics (algebra and geometry - which he called Euclid) and classical music. As far as English is concerned, he concentrated on the formation of the actual letters rather than on any content we had to write.

Around the piano, which he loved, we sang arias (English language versions) from various operas e.g. Verdi's Rigoletta *"La donna e mobile"* and J S Bach's *"Schafe konnen"* – Sheep may safely graze. I still sing the latter occasionally. I realized only many decades later that this sort of music was not common in primary schools. However, we also sang Irish songs especially *"The Minstrel Boy"*.

We all knew our "times tables" and in those days you added pence *e.g. seven nines are sixty three pence = five and threepence.*

How about reading and writing? For homework we had to write a composition. It had to fill a single page using (I think) what was called copperplate writing. There were four lines, the centre two were for ordinary letters and only some letters strayed outside to the outer two lines. These were letters like f (top and bottom) or say g (bottom only).

Aged nine, I was sent to the preparatory part of the local grammar school in Newry. That made life more serious. I travelled there daily by train and did this till I left school at 16.

Apprenticeship

I was offered and accepted an apprenticeship with a pharmacist friend of the local schoolmaster.

As an apprentice in Lurgan, about 30 minutes away by train, I worked most of the time but was released for part-time study in a nearby town (Portadown). This went on for 3 years and the teaching was dull and uninspiring. Most of the class failed the exam at the end of 3 years but I managed to pass.

During my four years as an apprentice I quickly learned to dispense medicines and to sell all the stuff in chemist's shops. Sadly (apart from salesmanship in which I did not excel) all that had to be learned was learned in about 6 months, but it only slowly became clear to me that a career as a pharmacist was not an attractive one for me.

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So, having qualified as a pharmacist, and found the occupation somewhat boring, John Clarke entered Queen's University Belfast to study microbiology. He graduated in 1958 with a First Class Honours Degree in the subject and, thereafter, enjoyed an outstanding career as an internationally renowned virologist and University teacher. He died in 2018.

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Denise Fearon

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