MY EARLIEST MEMORY

I am standing in the hall of our house in Fairview. My father and mother are dressed to go out for the evening. They are probably going to the pictures or maybe to a party - a card-party, it would be. My mother in particular liked to play whist.

Annie, the maid, will stay in the house with me and the babies - my brother Artie, aged three and my sister, Pattie aged two. I am four going on five and have started school.

"Please, Daddie, ask Annie not to make me read my lessons", I beg.

My father is in a good mood. "If you don't want to read your lesson-book you needn't" he replies.

I am satisfied with my victory over Annie. After my father and mother leave there is not a word about the lesson-book. As the evening goes on , however, I begin to realize that I have nothing to do. I am bored. I begin to feel that I would like to have my lesson -book to read. It has "the cat is on the mat" with pictures

But of course I do not ask Annie for the book.

Carmel Heaney

BACKGROUND NOTES

I suppose the reason this memory that it was an experience of getting what I wanted and being dissatisfied with the result.

The time: 1928

We lived in a three-bedroom terraced house in Fairview, respectable neighbourhood. My mother had inherited the house from her uncle, Captain Redmond. Her family were of seafaring stock, originally from Wexford although she had been brought in Kingstown.

She had worked in a booksellers Browne and Nolans before her marriage.

My father had been brought up on a farm in Cork. He ran away and joined the British Army during World War 1. He was wounded in the leg, a wound which came against him in later life.

At the time of this episode my father worked as a commercial traveller in books.

Judging from pictures, they were a handsome couple. They were hard times ahead but in 1928 they were probably enjoying life in reasonable comfort.

MEMORY LIST 2 Landmark Events

1.Once in a lifetime

1.1 An accident: The Sweeneys were our neighbours. Pat Sweeney had been out in 1916 but was respected by my parents (who didn't think much of the Rebellion) because he was sincere and hadn't made anything out of it. His son Aidan rode a motor bike. One night I woke up to a big commotion outside my bedroom window. I was sleeping in the front of the house and I seem to remember that it was ten o'clock at night. Aidan had been in collision with a car just at the top of our road and was killed. His sister Ethna was a pillion passenger but she escaped. This was an awesome event in all our lives.

1.2 First day at school: I went to the local national school. There was a large schoolroom in which there were several classes. I remember looking towards the other end of the classroom where the big girls sat. Ita Sweeney, the youngest of the Sweeney family, was there. I remember thinking that I would never be a big girl like her.

We sat at "forms" (long benches) at school. In the smaller classrooms there were "galleries" _tiered benches. I remember sitting on the gallery and being shown a picture of hell by one of the teachers. It was frightening - red flames shooting up and horned devils prodding the damned with pitchforks.

Another time a teacher punished my brother Artie who was sitting on the gallery too. I was upset and felt "that's my brother you're punishing" but I'm not sure if I actually said anything aloud. Another time Artie's nose started to bleed and the teacher said "You've only to look at anyone in that family and their nose starts to bleed. " I think I had to take Artie home.

1.3 Measles and whooping cough : being taken care of in a darkened room

1.4 First communion: I wore a white net dress and white buckskin shoes. I had a prayerbook with a mother -of-pearl cover and a silver medal on a chain. If people offered you money you were supposed to refuse, but if they insisted you would accept.

1.5 Visit of the inspector to the school. She was a Miss Murphy from my father's place in Co. Cork. The teacher asked me to recite and I recited a poem "Come down to Kew in lilac time". The inspector was displeased because it was an English poem.

1.6 Test in oral Irish for a scholarship to go the Gaeltacht. There was a "tie" between myself and another girl. We had to "cut" a book to decide who would get the prize. The teacher read the opposite side of the page to the one I had intended and I lost. I did not open my mouth to explain but felt I should have.

1.7 Confirmation: I wore a red nap coat, made by Jerry the tailor and a black beaver hat. I had a pink and grey dress made by my mother. I had my photograph taken. I took "Bernadette" as my confirmation name.

1.8 Doing the Primary Certificate examination: I felt sick with apprehension at breakfast and my mother was coaxing me to eat. She gave me a banana, which was a great treat.

Getting Lost

My sister and I went to elocution and dancing classes in the Peacock Theatre. I had my first experience of getting lost after one of these classes. We always took the tram home, which would have been very easy from Abbey St. to Fairview where we lived.

One foggy evening Patty and I were sitting in the tram and gradually it dawned on us that the streets were unfamiliar. We asked somebody and discovered we were going in the wrong direction. I think we were on the way to Sandymount or maybe Ringsend. Somehow people helped us to get back in the right direction and we eventually got home.

My sister has never let me forget that incident. I think she was more frightened than I was. Since I was the elder I felt responsible and did not pretend I was scared.

It was in connection with those elocution classes that I had my first experience of rejection. The classes were given by Madame Kirkwood Hackett. She was casting a.play "Treasure Island" which was to be put on in the Gate Theatre. At some point all the boys and girls were lined up and she named different one for the various parts. I was passed over. I felt devastated.

Later I heard someone say, perhaps my mother, that Madame Kirkwood Hackett alloted the parts i~ the play on selfinterested grounds, rather than on merit. There were girls calledCussen in the class whose fathet was a judge and who were well-off. They always got parts!

When the play was. put on eventually I suffered another blow (I was in the crowd scenes). After the performance boys and girls were called out and presents were handed up from the orchestra pit. I stepped forward but there was no present for
me. Of course, the presents were provided by the parents and mine either didn't know what the procedure was or didn't think it was important.

At another time my sister and I went to dancing classes to Miss Mackintoshes in Fairview. Maureen Potter was the star pupil.

Audrey McCrum and her sister Iris danced the Highland fling, wearing red tartan kilts, black velvet waistcoats and white blouses with lace jabots.

I think it was Maureen Potter who danced the gavotte wearing a crin'oline . Her partner wore a'Little Lord Fauntleroy suit in brown velvet and lace cuffs. I can still hear the tune that was tinkled out on the piano as they performed.

I had an Irish colleen costume - green skirt, red waistcoat- and white b-louse. I longed for black patent hornpipe with silver buckles but my mother would never buy them. She probably describe them as "common". This word was a great put-down when the real reason was that she probably couldn't afford them

I wanted above all else to have long hair. Mine was short, straight and "mousy". Girls who had long hair wore it in ringlets, formed by twisting rags round strands of hair.

Memory List 2B

2.1 Medical examinations at school: Once we were told there would be a medical examination that day. Usually you were given notice and wore clean underwear (bodice, vest and knickers). I was anxious and embarrassed because I hadn't changed my underwear that day.

2.2 There was to be an eye examination at school. You might have glasses prescribed. If your parents could not afford to buy frames you would have to wear the free wire frames and everyone would know you were poor. I was very worried that this might happen to me.

2.3 The whole family being taken to the Corporation clinic at Lord Edward St. for inoculation against scarlet fever/diphteria.

2.4 Learning to read: Before I knew how I used pretend to be able to read my prayer-book, when I really couldn't make head or tail of it!

2.5 Having my money robbed. My mother had sent me to the shop for messages. On the way home a man stopped me and told me my mother had sent him to bring her the change. I believed him and handed it over.

2.6 Going to the pictures for the first time. The film was "Alice in Wonderland". I was given the choice of that or a "Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Gate Theatre. I felt guilty at choosing the film rather than the play.

2.7 My first opera. It was "Faust" at the Theatre Royal produced by the Carl Rosa Opera Company. It made an unforgettable impression on me.

Summer Holidays

Every summer we children were sent to Cahore, on the sea in Co. Wexford, for our holidays. We stayed with our mother's sister, Mary, my godmother, and her aunt Bessie. Bessie was old, always dressed in black, and always seemed to wear a hat even as she went about tethering and untethering the goat.

We went by bus to Gorey or sometimes to Ballygarrett which was the nearest village. When the bus passed under the low railway bridge at Inch, beyond Ashford, I knew we were really on our way. We were met at the bus by a pony and trap, hired by Aunt Mary. They had an ass and cart themselves in which we rode to mass on Sundays.

The cottage was in the Burrow, a sandy area by the sea, with stone pillars at the entrance. The Laceys lived a few hundred yards away. Their house was much more substantial, although also thatched and low -roofed.

My aunts place was surrounded by a haggard over which hens and chickens roamed freely. I loved the smell of the mint which grew there.

I went to sleep in the high feather bed and woke up early next morning, marvelling at the silence. Then the cockcrow rang out. After breakfast, tea, soda bread and butter, home-made jam and maybe a boiled egg, we chi1dren ran over the little rise through the tall grasses, down to the sea. We played with the Laceys, who called us Dublin jackeens . We called them Wexford yellow-bellies. We gathered shells on the sea shore, looking for pearls in the shiny blue-black mussel husks. Sometimes we walked as far as Roney rock, and saw the seals for which it was named. At other times we went blackberrying, collecting the fruit in tin cans with handles made by the tinkers. They were sweet- cans.

Of course we had to help carry water from the well, which was some distance from the house.

My aunt Mary baked bread in the black iron pot hooked over the open fire. It was great fun to fan the flames with the bellows. Laceys had a fan built into their hearth. That was technology.

Aunt Mary occasionally went on a shopping trip to Gorey and came back with treats like Oxford lunch, a fruit cake wrapped in heavy foil with a trellis design. I loved that.

But the big excitement was when the fishing boats came in with the herring catch. One night there was a dance in our house. Someone played the melodeon and someone else sang a song:

> Oh I wonder, yes I wonder, yonder, will the angels way out yonder,
> Will the angels play their harps for me.

My aunt Mary danced and the fishermen flirted with her. It was all so exciting

Another night there was a big dance in Lacey' house. Maybe it was Hallowe'en. I remember being worked up to a fever pitch of pleasurable excitement playing snap apple.

In the middle of the fun my aunt arrived to take me home. My father had arrived unexpectedly. He was a commercial traveller in those days and drove a car. He didn't say much to me but I could feel his anger. His temperament and whole outlook on life would have been totally different from Mary's. She lived for the day and took people as she found them. He was ambitious and judgemental. He probably had a poor opinion of the Laceys as he had of Wexford people in general. Cork people were different.

What a bitter blow it was for me to be yanked away from the party. Disappointment overwhelmed me and confusion also. I didn't understand my father's attitude. Maybe it was then I started developing the feeling that every silver lining has a cloud inside it.

A Child's Day in Summer

It was 1936. Ireland was still in the grip of the Economic War with England. de Valera announced his forthcoming new constitution. The Germans oCcupied the Rhineland, the Italians invaded Abyssinia. The Spanish Civil War began.

The people of Cahore , on the Wexford coast, went about their lives as if none of this concerned them. It certainly did not concern the little city girl who had come from Dublin with her brother and sister to spend the school holidays with Aunt Mary and great -aunt Bessie.

No one could foretell that within a few years the coalboats from Wales would no longer come into Synnott's coalyard. The short stretch of sea between the two coasts would soon enough be submarine- infested. The mysterious Miss Georges, remnants of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, who lived in the castle on the cliff-top, would die off like the last roses of summer. As young girls Miss George and her sisters Miss Muriel and Miss Elaine had been whisked to and from their school in England, and remained throughout their lives as remote from the locals as if they had been in purdah. In due course their residence, once terra incognita to all but a privileged few, would resound to the raucous din of bar customers, open to all who had the price of a drink.

The" bathers" Summer visitors from Lancashire, otherwise known as the Rockferry girls, would be missed, though not by Father Kavanagh P.P. who had had to denounce them from the pulpit for wearing beach pajamas.

Mrs. Cosgrove, the local Bohemian type, still went swimming every morning ~ an astonishing habit to the seafaring folk of the area who believed the only way to go the sea was in a boat. Her idiosyncracy was put down to her age - she was seventy.

The little city girl was sent by her aunt to collect butter from the Bradys who lived in the Hermitage. It was a lovely old grange-type farmhouse, sadly neglected'. The stench of the butter was an indication of the standards of hygiene of "Bridge" _short for Bridget- and her brother. But" country" butter was less expensive than creamery.

How lovely by contrast to visit the Misses Redmond whose garden exuded scents of mignonette and sweet William,setting off their thatched, diamond paned cottage to perfection. There they sat, porcelain faces framed by old lace and cameo brooches, looking for all the world like those embroidered ladies in crinolines depicted on so many tray-cloths.

Then on to the Earls, the most substantial farmers in the area, to collect milk. The Earls were Protestants and had survived the troubles by treating all sides with impartiality. The stereotype of the industrious, hard-working, good-living protestant fitted them perfectly. Mrs. Earls tended a magnificent kitchen garden and gave the visiting children an armful of flowers and a pot of home-made jam to bring back to the aunts. It was likely to be vegetable-marrow, the children's least favourite jam. Those were the days before the Irish Countrywomen's Association had persuaded farmers' wives in general, viz. Catholics, that they too could produce prizewinning country crafts and comestibles. Sometimes the Earls children, Betty, Dorcas.and Derek were around to play with but they very often had tasks to do.

Finally, on the way home, a call at the cottage of Nanny Redmond, a distant relative who slopped around in buttoned boots the tops of which met her trailing skirts. She carefully unfolded the newspaper in which a loaf of bread was wrapped, smoothed it out and squinted at the headlines.

"I see" she drawled disapprovingly with her flat Wexford intonation, "that the Emperor of Japan is at it again". So someone did care about the world outside after all! Nanny had her eye on Manchuria.

Carmel Heaney
December 1991

Cahore

It is the first day of the summer holidays t wake up in the high feather bed, covered with a patchwork quilt, in the small room in my aunt Mary's cottage in Cahore.
"Wake up, sleepyhead" says my aunt as she shakes me . It is good-humoured shake. Aunt Mary is always in a good humour. She is my godmother and lives in the cottage with aunt Bessie who is her aunt. Bessie is a widow, and they both live on her inheritance. She is always dressed in drab black, complete with hat, even indoors. She doesn't say much, except to the chickens. I can hear her "cluck, cluck, clucking" to them as she scatters Indian meal as they scurry in and out of the kitchen.

I bolt my breakfast of milk, soda bread and boiled egg, impatient to go over the burrow to the strand,. I can hear the sea gently lapping only a few hundred yards away.

My brother and sister, both younger than me, scamper off with me. "Is it all right to go up to the Laceys?" we ask. "Be off with you, but be back in time for your dinner" replies At Mary. Dinner in those days was at 1 o'clock. Lunch had not been heard of.

The Laceys kept summer boarders - "bathers" as the locals called them. When the Donnelly family were staying, there was plenty going on. Marese was about my own age. I admired her hair enormously. Her little brother Michael spoke with a stammer which didn't stop him from making himself heard. "Have you any aer-aer- aeroplanes?" was his standard greeting as he came into our kitchen. He meant the cigarette cards which Aunt Mary got with her cigarettes.

The Donnellys were obviously very well off. They were in charge of a governess and their parents came only occasionally. This put them on a higher social level than us. They had an indefinable aura of ease and what I would now call charm, a word not then in my vocabulary. I for my part felt at a disadvantage compared to them. Charm was not my strong point

After dinner I was about to take off again when my Aunt Hary called me aside. "I want to tell you about a little girl who used to stay here" she said. "That little girl was very good. She always washed the dishes without being asked". I took the hint and set to at the dishpan.

One thing I liked about Aunt Mary was that she treated me like a friend almost an adult. At home I would simply be scolded in short order if I didn't do things right.

The atmosphere in Cahore was more relaxed than in my parents 'house. They were suffering all the cares and tension of bringing up a large family with constant money worries and nothing in the way of security. Aunt Mary, who was "an old maid", by comparison lived a kind of emancipated existence. She had a happy-go -lucky disposition, she smoked and loved socializing - "cabin-hunting" my father called it disapprovingly. He and my mother believed in keeping yourself to yourself.

Later I realized that Aunt Mary lived in a kind of fool's paradise. She was living on Aunt Bessie's money which in due course ran out. Mary ended her days with us in Dublin, ostensibly to help my mother who, however, made it plain that she didn't need help. But all that was in the future and I felt more carefree round Aunt Mary than I did-round my father and mother. She always stood up for me. I suppose I was a kind of pet _not a role I often enjoyed as a child.

I overheard a conversation between herself and Aunt Bessie once. "That child always has her nose stuck in a book" grumbled Bessie. "Leave her alone, she's a scholar" replied Mary.

And another time my sister and I were prevailed on to perform a party piece. We sang a duet:

Two little girls in blue lads, two little girls in blue
They were sisters, we were brothers…

It was a sentimental ballad about lost love.
"That's a foolish song" said Aunt Bessie.

Speaking as an adult, I must say I agree with her. But Mary thought it was great that we were able to sing at all!

When the holidays came to and end and we arrived back in Dublin the streets always looked so crowded together and dusty. I felt hemmed in

Driving to confirmation

I was born into the Irish Free State but of course my mother and father had grown up under the British Empire. My father had been brought up on a farm in Co. Cork. After his father died, there was a row about the family farm, and he left home and joined the British army. He served in the Great War and was wounded in the leg.

My mother carne from Kingstown, now Dun Laoghaire, and had worked before her marriage in Browne and Nolan's, the
bookseller One of " her earliest memories was running after Queen Victoria's carriage when the queen drove away from Kingstown pier on a visit to Ireland.
My mother's family were all mariner's with roots in Co.Wexford. Her father died at sea while on duty on the mail boat, The house we lived in was inherited by her from her uncle, Captain Redmond, for whom she had kept house when his wife died.

On one side of us lived the Nivisons. They were Scottish Presbyterians and had only one child, Leslie. Mr. Nivison worked in the "Irish Independent" as a printer, and Leslie grew up to be a newspaper editor. The dreaded "word "Freemason" was murmured about Mr. Nivison. Years later, when I was engaged to be married to the man who became my husband, a Protestant, my mother asked me with trepidation if he was a Freemason. She was relieved when I told her no. A Protestant she could accept barely. But a Freemason was something else

The Collinses,lived at the back of us. They also Protestant with one child only, Hazel. She very often didn't want to eat her dinner and her father would chase her round the garden with it. My mother used to say that she had the opposite problem. There were eight of us eventually and she couldn't keep up with our appetites

The Sweeneys lived on the other side of our house. Pat Sweeney had been out in 1916.My parents didn't think much of the Rebellion, as it was always called in those days. But they respected Mr. Sweeney, because he was sincere and didn't make anything out of it, as did some of the politicians.
Opposite us lived the Gouldings. Maureen was one of my friends and of course none of us could foresee that her brother Cathal would grow up to be a prominent figure in the post-1960 IRA.

Another friend was Mary Russell. She was the only girl in her family and had a roomful of dolls. I was often invited to her house to play but she complained that I spent the time reading her books instead of playing with the dolls. Dolls left me cold.

Mary and I made.our confirmation together. I wore a red nap coat, made by Jerry the tailor,who made all our good coats, a black beaver hat and a pink and grey dress made by my mother. Black patent shoes and 1vhite ankle socks completed the outfit.

It was a very bad day and Mary and I were driven to the church by her uncle. He was Sean Russell, then on the run as a member of the illegal IRA. He lived a James Bond -type existence and died a few years later in the course of conspiring with the German government to foment pro-Axis activity in Ireland during the Second World War.
It's a long way from a little girl in pinafore and flying hair running after Queen Victoria's carriage to a solemn l0-year old getting into a car driven by an IRA man to be taken to her confirmation.