

My First Book

By John Pepper

The first book I can recall reading was *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, which Santy brought me at Christmas 1963, two months after the assassination of President John F Kennedy, in Dallas on 22nd November. I distinctly remember that the arrival of *Black Beauty* to my then embryonic library, coincided with our kitchen table having piled upon the corner of it bundles of newspapers containing voluminous information about President Kennedy and his family. One dare not disturb or rearrange them, without the express authorisation of my late mother. This collection of newspapers sat under the picture of the Sacred Heart, with its flickering red light beneath the frame illuminating the image of Christ, whose countenance was one of acceptance and suffering, while at the same time the image depicted His blood dropping from His wounded heart.

While I read and re-read the story of that little foal, *Black Beauty*, repeatedly, and privately lamented its life of trauma and hardship, albeit with an ending in an environment of deserved comfort, the story never ignited any motivation to '*put pen to paper*'.

In my early youth, I immersed myself in reading about the lives of Irish revolutionaries who fought during 1916, in the War of Independence, and the Civil War, such as Dan Breen, Michael Collins, Liam Lynch and Eamon de Valera. But my instinct for reading material, other than that which would serve my academic and vocational pursuits, were parked to one side for the best part of sixty years. An exception was the writings of the great poet and writer Patrick Kavanagh, who hailed from our neighbouring parish, Inniskeen, in Co. Monaghan.

I am privileged to say that I saw Paddy, as he was known to the locals, on several occasions. Firstly as a schoolboy at Inniskeen national school and, some years later, as he travelled on the CIE bus coming from secondary school in Dundalk. I recall all of us pupils in the schoolyard during lunchtime running to the wall and gate when one of the boys would announce, "*Here's Paddy Kavanagh coming*". Paddy would be walking to his home in his townland of Mucker, having spent some time in Dan McNello's pub after getting off the bus. More often than not, Paddy would ignore us, and the rare occasion when he spoke, it was in a gruff manner and tone, usually complemented by a fit of spluttering and coughing. Both of which had become a characteristic hallmark of his persona following the removal of one of his lungs when he developed TB in the early 1940's.

On one of his trips home, on our school bus from Dundalk, I witnessed at first hand Paddy using - to great effect - his post-TB disability of prolonged coughing and spluttering to successfully avoid paying the bus conductor the fare to Inniskeen. His only concession was to offer the bus conductor a mouthful of Powers whiskey, from the half noggin bottle he took from the inside pocket of his stained and threadbare shower coat. This was only after he, Paddy, had taken a mighty slug from it himself in the presence of the bus conductor!

The bus had stopped to put the non-paying customer off. But the unfortunate bus conductor, having declined the medicinal generosity from Paddy, pressed the bell in a gesture of resignation, and the CIE bus brought the great poet to his next destination, Dan McNello's pub in Inniskeen. There, the patrons would give him a wide berth lest they find themselves

referenced in any of his writings. It is for this reason, sadly, that Paddy is reputed to have said on various occasions and written, "*What did the school children see in me, while the grown-ups in Inniskeen village went out of their way to avoid my company?*"

Having read Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*, *The Green Fool*, as well as all his poetry, I am privileged to have seen this truly exceptional genius and heard his spoken word in real life, albeit in manner and tone removed from what would be expected from such an accomplished human being.

Despite my deep admiration for Paddy Kavanagh and his literary genius, and even though we were '*neighbours' children*', I did not have the desire to undertake any writing other than that necessitated through my studies and work.

While composing this piece, the question crossed my mind, had our teachers at primary school in Inniskeen seized the various opportunities presented by Paddy Kavanagh walking past to enlighten us about the richness of his writings, would I have waited until I reached '*the sunset years of life*' with '*most of my spuds eaten*' to put pen to paper? Who knows. Perhaps us schoolchildren unconsciously and unwittingly saw more in Paddy Kavanagh, as he walked past our schoolyard in the early '60's, than those entrusted to our formation at the time.