The Hamlet in Lower Grange.

River Camogue upstream, flowing from Ballingoola, as seen from Grange Bridge.

FOND MEMORIES OF GRANGE

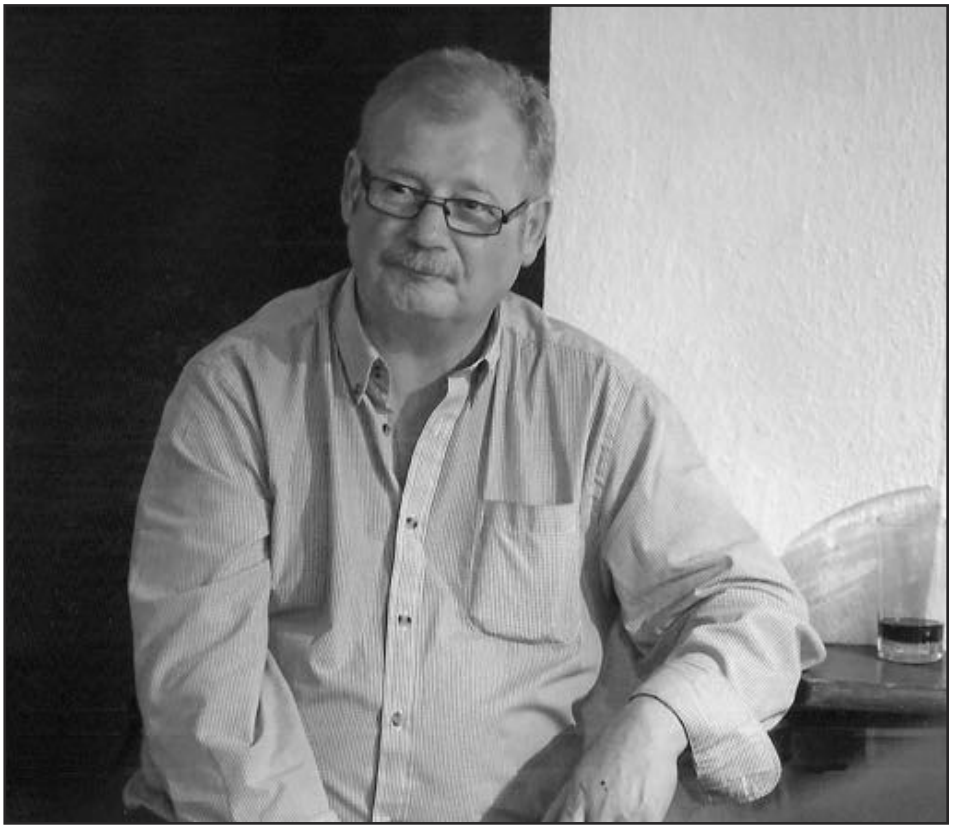
By Tom Bulfin *(Camass)*

Grange, a land of far away, of time long gone, of childhood and magic. Let me state at the outset, I carry a Camass passport and proudly so. But, half a century ago, many a happy childhood day was spent in Grange – around Hartigan's quarry, by Madden's Forge, under the stern gaze of the majestic line of giant beech trees in the 'Ranch' field, or messing about on sun-kissed days in the balmy waters of the Camogue River. Croker's wood was a land of magic and shadow, opening on to the palatial ruin that was Croker's great house, listening to the older children who thrilled and scared us with tales of the ghosts of grandeur who still seemed to hover around the silent, stark walls. These walls had once resounded to the din of daily life associated with the "Big House" but now were echoing to the caws and complaints of raucous jackdaws.

It is no exaggeration to say that this was a time in Irish history which saw the end of one era and the beginning of another. Pitch and toss and skittles were being played in front of The Hamlet Public House, but these would soon be replaced by the magic of ***The Riordan's*** and other RTÉ television programmes. However, on summer evenings the handball alley beside the river was still attracting crowds, and to our young eyes, the likes of Mike "Barlow" O'Donnell, Seán Madden and Tom Corrigan were superstars as they nailed the 'butt' at the base of the wall.

The Hamlet Bar had a little shop – you rang the bell and Mrs Doherty (known to all as Mary B) answered. I can now recall the wafting beery fragrance from the dark interior of the bar but our interests were of a more substantial nature! – Peggy's Legs, Sherbet Dabs, Flash and Macaroon Bars. (Each of these drool-fests deserves every capital letter they get!). Ice cream was sliced from the block, and we watched with razor-eyes as we felt Mrs Doherty had her favourites when it came to deciding where the knife came down on our particular three-penny slice!

The post office was a hive of industry, or so it appeared to us, children. As a very young child, my gran ruled the roost but for most of my childhood it was Aunt Breda, assisted by Aunt Maureen, who answered the bell and dealt with all office duties. The post office was the hub and fulcrum for all human endeavours in Grange and surrounding areas. There was always an extra flurry when John Joe



Gerard Doherty, Lower Grange, The Hamlet Bar owner.

Hourigan, Mike Madden or Pake Harty returned after their postal deliveries. Echoing through the years I can hear the authoritative stamp of the "An Ghráinseach" seal before the post was collected in the evenings to make the journey to the most far-flung corners of the globe (that's if a globe has corners!). Uncle George would be dispatched with a telegram to such exotic locations as Roxtown, Ballyhuddane or Luddenmore with an exhortation to "hurry back", a bidding or encouragement which rarely registered on George's psyche.

For excitement in Grange, it would be hard to rival haymaking. Bulfins saved hay in the Corcass and even we, youngsters, realised this to be an anxious time. We waited as concerned eyes drifted skywards wondering whether to cut hay and hope that the rain would hold off. Uncle Tommy was cautious by nature which often didn't suit our impatient young souls. But, then, haymaking was a complex business undertaken to ensure the cows had a nourishing supply for the winter. It involved cutting meadow grass, arranging it in rows and even sometimes in small "cocks" if it had become wet, before collecting it to make wynds which then, a little like the 'breathing' process of wine, were left in the meadow for saving before being stored in barns.

My favourite part was of a much more sedentary nature. When Breda arrived with tea and sandwiches, we all lay around and listened as Uncle Tommy and John Harty regaled us with tales of hurling games when Upper Grange played Lower Grange in The Ranch, or later when Grange had a club of its own, the 1941 County Minor campaign, or the 1953 South Final replay loss to Knockainey – still fresh in the early 1960s memories.

We youngsters were particularly agog as the tale of the demise of the short-lived Grange team was told. The team was making waves in the hurling scene until they came up against Kilteely, a well-seasoned side, not noted for having a great regard for the niceties of the game. Present day students of the GAA will note that this was the South Championship as Kilteely played in that division at that time. The game ended abruptly and in disarray with a large scale row, and shortly after the demise of the Grange Club followed. The players went back to Bruff and surrounding teams, in Bruff's case to form a very strong side through the 1940s and 1950s. There was an amusing aside to the Kilteely 'battle'. Grange had acquired two 'guest' players from Tipperary for the game – totally illegal, of course, but my dad's (John) excuse was that everybody did it then. He could remember them arriving in style, a pony and trap having been dispatched to transport them from Tipperary. His last sighting of the lads was as they headed for home that same evening, hurleys slung over their shoulders, albeit on foot.

After those tales, the discussion turned to the current state of club and inter-county affairs. Better still, if Uncle Patsy or Dad had time off work or if Uncle Joe was home from London, they joined us. *There were as many angles to the stories as there were swallows swooping over the freshly cut meadows.*

If that was bliss then, it was surely heaven to sit atop the wynds as the tractor chug-chugged along, belching out a diesel-whiff of black smoke when the time arrived to take the hay home. We knew we had come of age when we were given the job of waving on the impatient traffic lined on the road behind us and ready to roar off towards Bruff or Limerick.

Packing the barn with hay was tedious and sweaty work with not an inch of space wasted. As we neared the top of the barn, it became a job for small bodies to squeeze hay into every nook and cranny. Thankfully, my time as a "Victorian chimney sweep" was short lived as an allergy to dust left me with a runny nose and streaming eyes. I was grabbed by consoling female hands to be taken to the parlour, cosseted and consoled with Sullivans lemonade and custard creams biscuits. My two companions, brother, John, and cousin, Tom, continued the packing with gusto. They also graduated to tractor driving at a much younger age than I did. My younger brothers, Seoirse and William, could but dream of the day when they would be allowed take part in such daring acts.

There were always cautionary tales attached to haymaking. When the hay was plentiful, we would sometimes add a reek beside the barn. This, in essence, was a giant wynd – a feat of engineering which had to withstand the storms and rain of approaching winter. To emphasise the importance of this job being concluded correctly, Tommy always told the tale of the family who had built the reek with precision and left the 'topping' to a self-proclaimed expert. As they retired for dinner, he shouted down enquiring as to whether the job was to be concluded in an "egg-shaped" or "needle-point" fashion. He put the finishing touches before joining the company for a hearty meal. When they returned to the task, they discovered that a light summer breeze had scattered their efforts around the yard. I sometimes think that these light-hearted yarns were told as a kind of 'Aesop's Fables', to prepare us for the rigours of adult life, which, in those glorious fun-filled days seemed an age away but, in essence, were just around the corner.

While most of my memories in Grange are of summer, I can recall one particularly severe winter when the snow and ice seemed to go on ad infinitum, much to our youthful delight. The field across the road from Jerry O'Riordan's home became an 'Alpine slope', and we spent happy hours slipping and sliding down the hill and then climbing back up again. We rolled giant snowballs and watched them defy the rising temperatures to the very last when the thaw finally came.

Of course, there were darker days and the killing of the pig was one of those. This was an occasion when ritual, by necessity, was very important. The aim, of course, was to put food on the table. The journey was a bloody one, but there was no unnecessary suffering, and to focus the hand of the executioner, cautionary tales of botched killings were told. So, the knife had to be sharpened, boiling water ready at the right time, overly-agitated moves by inexperienced hands on the last few yards of "death row" had to be avoided, and, most important of all, came the final thrust where ice-cold nerves were needed to dispatch the pig to the truffle–filled haggard in the sky with least suffering. But all was rapidly forgotten as we feasted on pudding and fresh pork leaving an aftertaste that I can still savour, but one that will sadly now never be repeated.

My grandfather was a man of benign nature, whose stories of the "Little Red Hen" can reel me back to a sense of security and safety only felt in childhood. But gentle and all as he was, woe betide you if you moved while the Angelus boomed out on Radio Éireann. And never once do I recall us being late for Mass in Grange Church where the distinctive click-clack of heels on the wooden floor still resonates through the years.

The clock ticks on, waiting for no man. Most of the people in these memories have passed on, but they left a rich legacy. They were a God-fearing people who had time: time to reflect, time to help and time to guide in the Grange of fifty years ago.