

# Chasing Bobby And Paddy O

By Fred Karr

*Photo - Numbers*

*Second Place (Tie) - Short Story*

## **Prologue — The history**

The island of Ireland joined Britain in 1801, but for years many Irish wanted to break free from British rule. After the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, Ireland was given the 26 southern counties and Ireland became the Irish Free State. The six northern counties maintained "loyalty" to the British Crown and became Northern Ireland or Ulster.

The Treaty of 1921 caused such tensions that the Irish Civil War broke out and lasted until 1923. More than 1500 were killed and thousands more were injured. At one point the British sent 6,000 of its troops to Dublin to put down the rebellion. If this sounds like bullying in any way, consider the following - of the 193 countries that belong to the United Nations today, Britain has invaded 171 of them, The United States included!

Because the Irish Civil War was a conflict between Irish Nationalists over whether or not to accept The Anglo-Irish Treaty, the seeds of the IRA or Irish Republican Army were sown. Bobby Sands of Ulster and Paddy O'Halloran of Ireland, two of the youngest nationalists for a unified Ireland became inexorably linked, though years apart. This is a story of paying tribute to these two immortal heroes.

## **The story of the trip**

Thomas Wolfe once said, "You can't go home again," but after 63 years my brother Bruce and I were going to give it our best shot. We were 18 and 16 in the summer of 1955, and we had saved up our earnings from paper routes and odd jobs for two years so that we could buy round trip boat fares to Europe. We bought Raleigh bicycles in Cornwall, England, and began a 1600 mile journey that would take us into 13 countries and dozens of youth hostels.

Our two prime targets to revisit were Belfast in Northern Ireland and Dublin in Ireland. We decided to reverse the path that we'd taken in 1955. This time we'd go by rail from Southampton, England, to Glasgow, Scotland, sail out of Glasgow to Belfast, and then rent a car and drive south to Dublin.

Dublin held many fond memories for us. There was The River Liffey and Guinness Brewery where Bruce had drunk all his samples and mine, too. We both remembered shaking the leathery hand of the 900 year-old man, and standing in absolute awe before the very organ Handel had written The Messiah on. 700 people had jammed Dublin's Musick Hall on April 13, 1742, to hear the new symphony he had written especially for Easter. But most of all we wanted to first find our old youth hostel and then find the house Dubliners called "Leven Leven".

Leven Leven was really house number 1111 on The River Liffey where Paddy O'Halloran had lived when he was dedicating his life to keeping Ireland free from the British Crown. Paddy O was so

revered by so many that an old—timer had suggested that we sit on a bench across The Liffey facing Leven Leven and just watch for an hour. The number of people who walked past that house with an upraised arm in honor of Paddy O was both moving and overwhelming. Bruce and I wanted to sit on that very bench one more time to see if any arms would still be raised Skyward after 63 years.

So it was that we sailed from Glasgow to Belfast, this time sailing midday and not through the middle of a cold night aboard a 3rd class cattle steamer. We sailed west out of The River Clyde and into the Irish Sea. We saw Belfast long before we docked, and this time Belfast would come before Dublin.

Youth hostels have long limited overnight stays and meals to hikers and bikers. We were neither, traveling now by car in a couple of days to Dublin. We had written ahead to both hostels requesting special permission to stay — so granted. Before we even tried to find our hostel on Grosvenor Road, we had the name of Bobby Sands clearly etched in our minds. Bobby Sands was only 16 months old in 1955. He volunteered for The IRA when he was 18 in 1972. Our Belfast map showed The Bobby Sands Mural just two blocks from where we thought our hostel would be. We couldn't wait to visit this “shrine”.

Locating Grosvenor Road, we quickly found the hostel and checked in. Then using our map we walked to the end of Grosvenor, turned right on Falls Church and within three blocks found the Mural we had never seen. Bobby's Mural today graces and covers one whole side of the two-story political offices of Sinn Fein, the largest Irish Republican Party. While both Sinn Fein and the IRA seek separation from the British Crown and seek a unified Ireland, it is said that the IRA wages an armed campaign and Sinn Fein maintains the propaganda war.

The Bobby Sands Mural shows Bobby's smiling face framed in a home plate shape that parallels the building side. The Mural is an imposing two stories high. Below his collar line it says simply "Bobby Sands MP". MP means Member of Parliament, 3 seat Bobby had won by 30,000 votes while serving a 14 year prison sentence on weapons charges. While incarcerated, he organized a prolonged hunger strike protesting prison conditions.

It seemed to matter not that Bobby's new status as MP and growing pressure to have his demands met fell on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's deaf ears. And on May 5, 1981, 66 days after beginning the hunger strike, Bobby Sands died. Thatcher was condemned around the world for letting a fellow MP die. Over 100,000 marched in his funeral procession. Nine more prisoners died before the hunger strike ended. Soon after, prison reforms that met reasonable demands were granted.

Bruce and I left Bobby in Belfast and this time motored the 168 kilometers south to Dublin. 63 years ago we had bicycled that 105 mile stretch north. We knew if we could find the Guinness Brewery, then our old hostel was only a block north on Watling. Watling is 2 blocks long and tees at Victoria Quay on The River Liffey. Once more it took us little time to check in and be off to find Leven Leven.

Leven Leven sat right on The Quay facing The Liffey. We really didn't know if the house would still be there. No mention whatsoever could be found on the detailed map of Dublin that we had studied, yet there it was as we remembered it with the same muddy yellow door. And there was the bench across The Liffey facing Paddy O'Halloran's house. Absent was any sign or marking commemorating its historic significance. Bruce and I looked at each other, looked across The River at the bench and simply nodded a "Let's do our hour's sit" one more time.

Walkers and bikers alike used the quays daily on either side of The River, so there was always a lot of people traffic. An odd sense of déjà vu swept over us as we sat on that same bench and most unobtrusively watched for signs of anyone who still honored Paddy O while passing Leven Leven. In the two hours we sat there, we counted 17 raised arms, 5 Irish flags, and a shout we didn't understand. We guessed Gaelic that was probably to the effect of "Ireland Forever". One elderly woman knelt on the doorstep with a bowed reverent head. All of this, 63 years after we had first sat on that bench. Paddy O had not been forgotten!

Bruce looked at me with tear-filled eyes and saw that my eyes were also wet. We bear - hugged each other for the longest time. Then he smiled and said, "Let's go home."

### **Epilogue**

1. Our trip including the two Atlantic Ocean crossings covered three weeks in all.
2. The price of an overnight stay in a youth hostel in 1955 was 2 shillings and 6 pence or about 35 cents. Belfast's hostel prices today are \$18.45 for a single bed in a mixed dorm room and \$52.70 for a private room with 2 beds. Dublin today charges \$20.26 for a single bed in an 8 bed dorm.
3. Ireland became Eire in 1937 and The Republic of Ireland in 1947.
4. Ireland and Ulster remain divided today.
5. While a few photos of Bobby Sands exist including The Mural, no picture of Paddy O has ever surfaced.
6. Sadly, my brother Bruce has since passed away.