

The life and letters of Featherly Bourke

PART ONE

"Ah, my dear children, why do you look at me like this?"
Euripides: "Medea"

by Jim Kemmy

In September 1973 the well-known wealthy Limerick feather merchant and scrap metal dealer, Mikey "Feathery" Bourke, died. For over sixty years Featherly had been a familiar figure to successive generations of Limerick people as he carried out his business in High Street and Cornmarket Row. He was born on June 6th, 1895, one of a family of four brothers and two sisters. His mother, Lil Bourke, had worked hard in building up the business and, in due course, she passed it on to Featherly, with all her money and property.

Some of Featherly's nephews have become even more widely known than their unique uncle. Sean Bourke, a son of Featherly's brother, Frank, gained world-wide publicity for his role in the escape of the spy, George Blake. Bourke is now recognised for the accomplished writer he was and his book **The Springing of George Blake** has become a best-seller in many countries. Another nephew, Desmond O'Grady, a son of Featherly's sister, Annie, has been hailed as one of the best of the young Irish poets and his poetry has been widely published in more than a dozen volumes.

With an uncle such as Featherly, it was natural for the two writers, Bourke and O'Grady, to turn their writing pens in his direction. Sean Bourke, who, over a year before, had written an affectionate memorable tribute to another Limerick character, "Gurky" McMahon, was stirred by Featherly's death into writing his uncle's obituary. Unlike the vast majority of the pious, hypocritical and cliché-ridden eulogies that pass for obituaries in the local press, Bourke attempted to tell the story "like it was". The obituary, published in the **Limerick Leader** and **The Limerick Weekly Echo** on September 15th, 1973, described how Featherly ac-

quired his wealth.

In due course the others all fled the nest in the natural way of things, but Featherly stayed behind with his mother and became the natural choice to inherit her extensive property, her money, and the scrap business which was to become the centre of his life for more than sixty years, and which gave him his nickname that he was to take to the grave with him. He was a wealthy man, having made his pile, like so many other scrap dealers, in the time of the war. At one time he would have bought anything that was resaleable at even a penny profit from a rabbit skin to an old steam engine; from a jam-jar to a bundle of rags - having first thoroughly searched the rags to ensure that they were not weighed down with rocks.

In his poem, **Memories Of An Influential Uncle**, published in Spring 1968, Desmond O'Grady is even more forthright in his poetic efforts to capture his childhood impressions of his "influential uncle".

In a crow black suit you'd confuse for a beggar's, grey hair combed straight across his head, he stands in the door of his condemned house, bronzed fists in his coat pockets, spit grey eyes no brighter, no bigger than nailheads. In his forehead a small deep dent from a shaft of a backing cart when a child.

Away over the rooftops and pigeon-coops, the spire of St. John's Cathedral. Straight in front, his slum inheritance - his mother's empire. Over his head the three floors of the old house that bred the lot of them, still furnished, its harm done. Forty years of dust on the sheet-covered forms. Up in the rat-looted attic, black sea trunks still standing half open, packed with the wardrobe he wore on

those Indian cruises after his mother's death and her will. Not a penny has seen the daylight since. He remained alone: his position with contemporaries always the blind side of form, playing rare and wise in his silences - a kind of hostility. He was tight with money, superstitious, secretive, cold as herring when driving a bargain, honest as salt. He feared his God, but distrusted his clergy. He returned unchanged from his cruises and never again went anywhere.

But for me as a child, in that long joyless night of the War, his presence was brightly homeric. While Hitler's guns converged on the Channel and Goering came nightly to hammer down Coventry, I sat by the fire while he told of other times and their heroes: the mad Black and Tans or Cuchulainn, O'Neill, Dan O'Connell, or Niall of the Nine Hostages, the Children of Lir or the Wooing of Emer, the Salmon of Knowledge or the Story of Deirdre, the coming of Patrick, the Three Sons of Uisneach, the Return of Ossian or Death of Cuchulainn, the Danes and the Normans, Hogan the Poet of Thomond or the ballad of The Blacksmith of Limerick, the Civil War that divided the family, my grandfather's plunge to ruin and death from his drinking, my grandmother's curse on his sons' children. He distrusted success and any characteristic trait of a questionable ancestor. His greatest hate was proud independence in youth, or any sign that might lead to it; frequently warning individualistic action from pride could only end badly - and cited relations.

One of Featherly's first jobs after leaving school was at the Theatre Royal, where he worked as a ticket-collector in the "gods" section of the theatre. His father showed no interest in building up the family business and gradually Featherly became more and more absorbed in helping his mother. Featherly joined her on a full-time basis in running the business. Both worked

as on that date I will be going up north on the St. Louis. Trusting you will oblige.

Back in Limerick, Feathery's good humour appears to have lasted for a short time. His new mood even brought on some philosophical thoughts on the benefits of good health and contentment. On September 6th, 1937 the family's writing talent, later to emerge in the work of Sean Bourke and Desmond O'Grady, may have had its first flowering in the tentative efforts of Feathery to come to terms with his new insight into life's secrets. Appropriately enough, he chose the vehicle of verse to convey his thoughts:

Contentment is all that I ask,
It's a blessing that wealth cannot give,
So let us endeavour the task
To practice as long as we live.

In August, 1939, he went off on yet another sea cruise, this time taking in Naples on his trip. He came back to Limerick a few days before the Second World War broke out, and, in the words of Desmond O'Grady "never again went anywhere".

Attempting, perhaps, to take advantage of Feathery's new mood, some of his relatives made efforts to translate this attitude into more meaningful channels. These efforts were neatly summed up in a postcard sent to him by his youthful nephew, Tommy O'Grady, from Kilkee, on August 31st, 1940. The postcard, carefully selected by the boy's father, Leonard O'Grady, had as its caption: "You got a little Something the Others haven't got". On the back Tommy had written: "Mikie, Will you send me down my Sunday penny tomorrow? I want to buy ice-cream! I went swimming today, Tommy".

But Feathery's new-found bonhomie appears to have quickly evaporated in the harsh realities of the Limerick of the late thirties. He soon showed he had every intention of holding on to that "little something the others haven't got". On October 18th, 1938, Christy O'Toole of Kanturk, Co. Cork, wrote to Feathery:

Dear Sir, Just a few lines hoping you are keeping well. Would it be too much to ask you to send me a pound, as things are very bad with me for the past few months? ... The very first chance I get to pay it back, you can be sure I won't be long.

Feathery, at this stage, must have been still affected by his post-holiday euphoria and, on the following day (October 19th), he sent a postal order for the sum of twenty shillings to Christy O'Toole. He also carefully kept the counterfoil until his death, thirty-five years later.

Not content with this success, O'Toole followed up with another let-

ter:

Dear Mick, Is there any chance you could send me on a pound, as things are very blue with me at the moment? I want to go out on the bicycle to pluck some geese, as Dermot will buy them from me. He told me that he would give me 1/5 lb., for them, just to help me out, as he would not buy from anyone else. I am very sorry to be troubling you, as I owe you another pound, but I will make it up with you some day. I suppose things are not too good with yourself.

Trusting you will oblige.

Christy O'Toole scored once again, and Feathery duly sent him a second pound. However, early in the following year, when O'Toole had failed to return the money and had left for London, Feathery wrote seeking the two pounds. O'Toole's wife sent his letter to her husband in London, and, on February 9th, 1939, he replied:

Dear Michael, I received your letter from my Mrs. As regards money I will be in about Monday or Tuesday. Sorry that you are put out about it, as I could have paid you in the bank the day we met.

On July 22nd of the same year (1939) a few weeks before Feathery's departure on his sea-cruise to Naples, he received a letter from his brother Frank. At this time Frank was employed as a rigger and was the father of six sons, including Sean and an epileptic boy named Frankie. His brother did not mince words in laying his family's and his own position on the line for Feathery:

Mick, I am sorry to be worrying you with my troubles, as I know you have plenty of your own; but I am getting desperate and fed up with life in general. I haven't a suit of clothes to go to Mass on Sundays with, only the clothes I go to work in, and they are full of oil and grease, with the result I don't go to Mass at all. Things are getting tough with me, although I am doing all in my power to make ends meet. Here is my expenditure for one week:

	Per week
Doctor's fees for treatment of Frankie	10-0
Insurance on children and self	10-7
Rent	7-6
Society A.E.U.	3-0
Household expenses for 7 days	1.15.0
Total	£3-6-1

I have 4 shillings left for clothes, boots, stockings, overalls, shirts, jerseys and for nine people and an occasional run to the pictures. So you can well understand the way I am fixed.

I wonder would you be humane enough to give me one of your cast-off suits of clothes to go to Mass on

days, or even an old coat - anything would be suitable.

I am thinking seriously of volunteering to go back in the Navy for the forthcoming war, as they are looking for men up to the age of 55. And if I do get back, I am going to remain in it until they blow me out.

There is one thing certain: I will have a good suit of clothes to my back and good food. Anything is better than this miserable existence.

It is not known whether or not Feathery gave his brother a cast-off suit or an old overcoat, of if he made any attempt to help the struggling family at this time.

Two months later, on September 23rd, 1939 Feathery received another letter from one of his eldest sister's sons:

Driver I/C, Finnan, K.

Sir, You told me to inform you of any moves I make. Well, as this War has broken out I have to go. At present all I know is that we go to Ascot tomorrow and from there on I have not the least idea where we are going. I will let you know as soon as we get over there. Well, cheerio.

I remain,
Yours truly,
Kevin Finnan.

Kevin Finnan was as good as his word and, in a series of letters, he kept Feathery fully posted on his progress and movements. But the time for a direct question had come and Finnan did not beat about the bush in putting it. He again wrote to his uncle:

Dvr. 1/C Finnan, K.,
M.T. Section,
1CT Training Regt. R.A.,
Woolwich,
London, S.E. 18.

Sir, In view of the fact that you asked me to keep in touch with you as it would be much to my advantage, I have been wondering if you meant financially? If this is so please let me know, as I have incurred many liabilities since my return here, and I would be extremely thankful for an advancement of £10. If I am wrong in thinking that my affair with you has anything to do with finance, please let me know as soon as possible.

I sincerely hope to hear from you in the near future.

I remain,
Yours truly,
Kevin Finnan.

It is not known whether or not Kevin Finnan got the £10, but by this time it appears that Feathery had reverted to his old self. During the war years his business prospered as the demand for scrap metal increased. And he began to grow even more remote from most of

