

Sean Bourke's missing Manuscript



One year after his death, mystery still surrounds the whereabouts of Sean Bourke's missing novel. The writer was completing the manuscript of **The Scrubbers**, a chronicle of his time in London's Wormwood Scrubs prison when he died on 26th January last, aged 49 years.

Based on his experience prior to meeting Russian spy George Blake in the prison, the typed pages disappeared following his death at Kilkee, County Clare. More than a year before, Bourke sobered up, stopped downing two bottles of whiskey a day, and headed to a seaside caravan to complete his second novel.

His first book **The Springing of George Blake** became an international best seller. Written mainly in Moscow, the novel detailed how he met Blake in prison and, over a period

By Frank Hamilton

of time, planned his escape to Russia.

George Blake, a senior British Intelligence officer, was exposed as a Russian spy in the early 'sixties. Sentenced to life in prison, the spy was detested by most of the Scrubs inmates. However, the editor of the prison magazine, was Sean Bourke, the enigmatic Limerickman with an admiration for the British way of life. The two immediately struck up an intellectual and literary relationship.

Largely self-educated, Bourke had a lively and striking literary style of writing. He came from a colourful Limerick family which included a legendary miser and a famous poet.

From his background of unrelenting poverty, Sean Bourke developed a distaste for accepted social convention. At twelve, he was sentenced to three

years in Daingean Reformatory, run by a male religious order. It was here that Bourke's attitude to organised religion became crystalised. In a searing document of painful and raw recollections **Daingean Days**, the Limerick writer described in harrowing detail punishments meted out to boys by the Oblate Brothers:

"It was the middle of October 1947, when I arrived at Daingean and I was twelve and a half years of age. Absolute silence had to be maintained at all times. There was no heating in the wash house and the ice was about a quarter inch thick in the basins. I copied the other boys and broke the ice with a quick jab of the elbow before having a wash in the freezing water".

Brother Ahern was supervising the wash house. He did this by standing on a wooden box. He was nicknamed "The Killer". I found out why on that very first morning in Daingean. Some boy was heard to whisper to another



Cahill's Garryowen Stores in the 1930s.

at the end of the washhouse. Brother Ahern went red in the face. 'If I catch the fella that's talked he won't be able to talk for a long time', he shouted.

Then suddenly he seemed to notice something. He jumped down off the box and ran to where the whisper had come from. He caught hold of a boy about 17 and proceeded to beat him methodically with his fists. He punched the boy in the face repeatedly until his lip was split and his nose spurted blood. In his frenzy Brother Ahern's crucifix worked its way loose from the belt of his cassock and, dangling from its neck cord, jumped about in a grotesque dance as he carried out his attack on the terrified boy.

Brother Ahern then resumed his position on the wooden box and glared up and down the washhouse. 'Ye scum of the earth', he screamed, addressing the inmates in general. 'Ye dirty filthy good for nothing scum of the earth. Ye dirty pack of robbers. Ye will be no loss to anyone when ye go back to the filthy dirty hovels and the ignorant illiterate fathers and mothers that ye come from'.

From the washhouse we were marched once more through the snow and the darkness to the chapel for Mass".

Daingean Days is Sean Bourke's last known but uncompleted work. It had been written at the constant urging of Jim Kemmy, who published extracts in **Limerick Socialist**. The two men had a respectful and at times fragile relationship. During the launch of Kemmy's political career in the 1974 local elections, Bourke had played an active and significant role. He was supporter, secretary, typist and odd job man, while insisting: "But I'm no Socialist".

It is to Kemmy's credit that he endured many of Bourke's bouts of temper to encourage him to write about Limerick, especially the poverty of the city during the war years. Sean made friends slowly, but fell out with them quickly. He had conflicting attitudes towards the people of his native place. And he made no secret of his contempt for most local journalists.

Bourke devoured newspapers. He often read fifteen a day between downing half pint glasses of whiskey. While Bourke was a local character, often surrounded by fair weather friends, my abiding image of him in the later years was of his large, lonely frame propped on a bar stool and his glazed eyes gazing soulfully into the golden amber of the whiskey glass.

I was fortunate to be one of the few Limerick journalists whom Sean did not attack, fight or fall out with over the years. We shared many memories: the thatched cottage in Kilfinane, complete with sughan chair piled high with

newspapers; the night in the old National Hotel when his gun kept falling out of his jacket; the long discussions on Limerick journalism; "Puerile", he would announce, "I rejected better copy for the Scrubs magazine"; the time he was consigned to St. Joseph's Hospital; and our television interview when Bourke brilliantly displayed his talent as an actor.



Sean Bourke

Sometimes we talked about serious topics. Did he really organise Blake's escape or did the KGB carry out the operation? How did he smuggle Blake to Moscow? What did he feel about Limerick? "All this will come out", he would say. "My second book will reveal everything". So **The Scrubbers** was to be his major work. His money was gone, and a return to writing assumed a new pressing importance in early 1981.

Sean Bourke made his last move: he packed his typewriter, left Limerick and moved into a caravan in Kilkee to finally complete his second novel. The booze behind him. Bracing sea air and long country walks restored his strength. One summer's day, when I was a press officer for the Shannon Development Company, I had to visit Kilkee to write an industrial story. I spotted Sean strolling, nay, swaggering along the promenade exuding the air of a man at peace with himself. I remember we talked about Limerick writer David Hanly and his book **In Guilt and in Glory**. "Hanly took a few jabs at your profession", he said. "No one escaped his knife", he added. "What a marvellous bloody way to get

everything off your chest!"

So he headed off, waving his walking stick, setting out on the path to George's Head.

On the morning of 26 January, 1982, Sean Bourke went for his regular walk along the Kilrush Road. Only a few hundred yards from Kilkee, he was seen to stagger, clutch his chest and fall dying on to the grass margin.

In the vital hours between word of his death reaching Limerick and relatives, the manuscript that Sean Bourke had been working on somehow disappeared. When Sean's brother, who travelled from Scotland, reached the caravan, there was no sign of any papers. Instead, all that greeted him was the remains of a meagre breakfast: part of a loaf of bread, and a half empty carton of milk.

In a final, symbolic gesture, his brother took the money found on Bourke's body, one pound and four pence, and deposited it in the poorbox at the County Hospital, Ennis, where the body had been carried. Sean would have approved.

Sean Bourke had lived a life of conflict with the forces of the establishment. He was a fearless critic of the harsh and hypocritical aspects of Limerick life. His book **The Scrubbers** was to tell it all. Now the manuscript is missing.

Bourke was particularly proud of qualifying as a recognised writer under the 1963 Taxation Act. His first book was deemed "of artistic and literary merit". With a flourish he told me: "That is some achievement, kid". It also meant that he received almost £100,000 tax free as a writer.

When he died on that cold January day one year ago, the apparatus of State once again swung into action; the Gardai, the clergy, the coroners; the dealers in death, viewed Bourke as another official statistic, and summing up all the insensitivity of a callous bureaucracy recorded on his death certificate: "Profession - None". It was the last, insensitive insult.

The talent Bourke had emerged from behind the brutalisation; flowered from the fear, and accused from the agony of experience. His voice was a powerful one on behalf of all the victims who suffered torture, humiliation, and degradation at the hands of Christian institutions.

The fact that Sean Bourke emerged and developed at all is a tribute to his determination. The fact that he soared to literary fame and stood on the threshold of greater recognition is remarkable.

Would **The Scrubbers** have added to his literary reputation? Maybe some day the missing manuscript will turn up, and then Sean Bourke's last testament will answer this and other questions about some hidden chapters in his troubled life.