CHAPTER IV

For a couple of years before it happened, my heart was set on going away to boarding school. My brother Eddie, three years older, had already been in Rockwell three years before I went (he, too, had skipped a class in primary school). From the way he spoke about it, it sounded like an attractive place. Perhaps, too, I was subconsciously affected in a positive way towards boarding schools by what I had read in books about such places, although all that I encountered in this way were English, and thus very different places to Irish boarding schools. My impatience to take on this new stage of my life would also have been compounded to some extent by a certain level of inverted snobbery which I encountered from fellow pupils in primary school. I am aware that this is a phenomenon which is far from unknown in coal mining areas across the British Isles; indeed, almost certainly it is not confined to such areas, or to these islands. I would not wish to overstate its importance: by any standards, it was on a fairly minor scale; however, for a young boy who had an otherwise very sheltered existence, such context was entirely absent from my consideration of the issue at the time.

At home, I had had my own bedroom. On my first night in Rockwell, I found myself sharing with about 50 or 60 others! “Holy Angels” was the name of the first dormitory I was assigned to. It was spartan. It was presided over by a prefect (these were young men in their early 20s who were training for the priesthood with the Holy Ghost Fathers, the order of priests under whose auspices the school was run), who occupied a cubicle in one corner of the enormous room.

The dormitory was only the first of many shocks to my unprepared system. Washing at 6.45 the following morning was with cold water. Throughout my six years in Rockwell, this did not change. Meals were taken by the entire body of students at the same time in the school refectory, a giant space in comparison to which even Holy Angels seemed small. As I recall, there were 16 boys to each table, divided into two groups of eight.

It was the food which was the greatest shock of all. From the earliest times that I can remember, food has always been important to me. More than the rest of the family, I always exhibited an interest in the subject. My mother, like a great many women of her generation, had had no specific training beyond watching her own mother in the kitchen, and always succeeded in putting tasty food on the table in sufficient quantities to satisfy a family of hungry boys. In Rockwell, it was a different story. Generally, food was brought to each group of eight in fairly large metal containers with, say, at dinner, meat in one, vegetables in another, and potatoes in the third. The containers were then handed around from hand-to-hand; unsurprisingly, the last of the eight found that quantity was somewhat lacking, but even the first in line would have wanted more. Occasionally, order broke down and there ensued what was colloquially known as a “grab”, where all eight boys reached into the container with fork or spoon, and where survival of the fittest was the order of the day. Like a great many of my schoolmates, for a great deal of the time during my six years in Rockwell I was hungry.

As to quality, the food was even more of a disappointment. As an adjunct, Rockwell had a catering school for trainee chefs. This was separate from the school, being located across the main driveway from the school proper. However, the kitchen for the school was manned by these trainees and their supervisors. Manifestly, the latter could have had no pride whatever in their work, and we boys were given a graphic illustration of why the quality of food in Irish hotels and restaurants in the 1960s and the decades that followed was so lamentably poor; the instruction that these young trainees got, as reflected by what was placed on the refectory tables, would quite rightly be viewed as almost criminal in countries, such as France and Italy, which boast a proper food culture.

The lack of quality in the food is all the more shocking when one considers that, in the early and middle 1960s, the advent of intensive farming – with its attendant baleful consequences for the quality of food on the plate – was still some years in the future, at least for Ireland. The country boasted then, as it does now, some of the best meat, fish and dairy produce in the world. That these excellent raw materials could be rendered into something so unpalatable is a swingeing indictment of the authorities in the catering school and, on a wider level, those responsible for putting food on tables in non-domestic situations in Ireland in the 1960s.

Having grown up beside the creamery, with no shortage of good dairy produce, in particular the locally produced butter, always available, it was quite a shock to discover that only margarine was available in school. The two are, of course, to make a very bad pun, chalk and cheese. For some reason, it is only in quite recent years that it has come to be recognised that, nutritionally, butter is infinitely superior; for decades, it was felt that, despite the fact that margarine could not begin to compare for flavour, it was a healthier option. Nutritionists now confirm that it is greatly more processed and less pure than butter, and contains far more in the way of potentially harmful ingredients.

Occasionally, parents or other relatives would visit the school, usually on a Sunday, and often take the lucky one out for a meal in nearby Cahir, Cashel or Clonmel. They would sometimes leave a food parcel behind, containing such luxuries as tinned meat, jam, biscuits, and the aforementioned butter. Invariably, as per the tradition of the school, the recipient would share these goodies with the other seven at table, thus raising morale among the small group and, coincidentally, exciting lots of envious glances from the occupants of nearby tables. The appetite of growing boys being what it is, such luxury tended to be short lived.

In recent decades, it has been customary for students in boarding schools, with few exceptions, to go home at weekends. It was not so during my time in Rockwell. Nor were there mid-term breaks in

those years. I seem to recall that, towards the end of my time there, we were allowed home for a weekend at Halloween; in 1961,that benefit had not yet accrued for students. It was the beginning of September of that year that I first went to Rockwell, and I was not to see my home again for more than three months. My brother and I were allowed home on 8 December. At the time, that was an important date in Ireland; The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, it was a church holy day, and students who lived near enough to the school were allowed home in the morning, and had to return that evening. The Creamery House, where I lived, was a fairly large house by most standards. I still recall being forcibly struck, on my return home, by how tiny the dimensions of the house seemed by comparison to what I had grown used to over the previous three months or so in school. The other lasting memory I have of that day, and a most agreeable one, was of the quality and quantity of the food put in front of me by my mother.

The first year of secondary school in Ireland, then and now, in most schools, and for no reason that I've been able to discern, is called Second Year. In the academic year 1961/62, Second Year, and the other four years up to and including Sixth Year, each had something between 100 and 110 students. Each year was divided, on the basis of academic merit, into four classes. I was in the top class – 2A. I have never been in the top rank academically, but in primary school I had been more or less at the top of each class. Here, I found myself somewhat below that level; moreover, having skipped class in primary school, I was now about a year younger than most of my classmates.

The academic staff consisted of priests, prefects and lay teachers. In a relatively large staff there were, inevitably, variations in quality. For the very most part, however, the standard of teaching was high, and the individual teachers exhibited mostly benign qualities: humanity, fairness, and a desire to bring out the best in their young charges. The only real exception I can recall from my six years in the school was Father Michael Lavelle. He taught Latin and one other subject. He also coached the Junior Cup Team (JCT) in rugby. He was bright and he was able, but he notably lacked one quality which is highly important in teachers (and, indeed, among those in many other occupations): patience. Like all other teachers in the school, he wanted his pupils to reach high levels of achievement. Unlike his colleagues, however, his principal means of bringing this about was by inducing fear in those under his tutelage. I was in his Latin class in my first year in the school. While he did not pick on me to the same extent that he did on some others, it was nonetheless a far from enjoyable experience. During my time in Rockwell, I do not recall being apprehensive in advance of individual classes; the exceptions to this were Latin classes when I was in 2A.

Three years later, I was to directly encounter him again. This time, I was part of the JCT rugby squad, which he coached. He was a highly demanding trainer and, again, inducing fear among the boys in the squad was his preferred means to achieving results. On one occasion during training, after I had failed to meet one of his exiguous requirements, he slapped my face. At that time, and for many years afterwards, corporal punishment was an integral part of primary and secondary education; as a concept, it was regarded by society at large – including, it has to be said, schoolchildren – as, not only unexceptionable, but also necessary for the maintenance of discipline in schools. (I recall that

when the Swedish government, in the late 1960s or early 1970s, banned such punishment, the measure was regarded by most of the world outside Sweden as utopian hogwash). If such an incident occurred today, almost certainly there would be significantly adverse consequences for the aggressor. It was a reflection of societal attitudes at the time that it did not even cross my mind to take the matter further. Obviously, the incident left an abiding – non-physical – impression on me, but almost certainly nobody else who was present would remember it today. The reality is that it was not an exceptional event; dozens – quite possibly, hundreds (he was on the staff before I arrived and for a number of years afterwards) – of other boys suffered similarly and, in many cases, far worse treatment at his hands than I did. Corporal punishment in Rockwell was regulated to the extent that it could only be administered by the Dean of Studies or the Dean of Discipline. Father Lavelle was the only one that I can recall on the staff who chose to ignore that rubric. In class, his preferred method of indicating displeasure towards somebody was to pinch that somebody very painfully by the ear or the scalp. While this behaviour was not replicated among his colleagues in Rockwell in my time there, it would not be regarded as by any means unusual by a majority of schoolchildren across Ireland at the time. What would have been looked at askance generally, even then, was the infliction of physical violence during training for sports, and my experience was far from being exceptional among the squads of players trained by Father Michael Lavelle.

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Gradually, I settled in to the everyday patterns of school life. That first year in Rockwell was probably the unhappiest time of my entire life, but humans are programmed to adapt to many things, including the life of an institution such as a boarding school. Academically, while I did not shine, I performed adequately well overall. I took up rugby for the first time. This was – and is – the main sport of the school, and played during the first two terms between September and Easter; from Easter to summer, the focus switches to athletics. The youngest rugby team put out by the school was the under 14's. From that time, rugby has always been of huge interest to me. It and hurling have been my two biggest sporting passions. The Senior Cup Team (SCT) played a number of friendly matches against other top rugby schools from different part of Ireland during the first term, before the focus switched to the competitive Munster Senior Cup in the second term. As a spectator, I was thrilled by the open running style of play of that team, which had future Ireland international Johnny Moroney at outside half. The start of my own modest rugby career, however, on the under 14's, was less thrilling. I was selected as a prop forward. It was a position which did not suit me, and it was to be the only time during my less than stellar career when I played in that position. We played some matches against other schools, in our case confined to the province of Munster. The best part of the experience, by far, was playing an away match in Cork and an away match in Limerick. Getting away from the school for an afternoon and evening, having a post-match meal of a quality far superior to the regular Rockwell fare, and bus journeys with lots of singing and good cheer, were experiences to be savoured amid the general greyness and despondency.

It was during this year that I took up smoking. Even though I only turned 12 years old a month or so after arriving in Rockwell, I quickly became addicted. It was an addiction that I was to live with for 10 years. I had tried cigarettes a couple of times before going to Rockwell. The first time could not be described as a pleasant experience, but unfortunately it was not sufficiently unpleasant to put me off the habit (in retrospect, the experience of some others who, in their first encounter with nicotine, continued to smoke until they got physically sick, would have been what I really needed). Smoking was, of course, against the rules, both at home and in school. It was, however, very fashionable among film stars and others who set cultural trends. Both these factors obviously came into play when I started to smoke in Rockwell. I was not a particularly rebellious youth; nor yet was I the opposite. In this context, of course, peer pressure – which can, of course, be a very positive influencer, but so often in the case of teenagers is a negative force – must have played its part, although I cannot specifically recall my mindset when embarking on that meretricious pursuit.

It was during this year, also, that I received my Confirmation. In Castlecomer at that time, this occurred only every three years. Skipping Fourth Class meant that I was not confirmed whilst in either of the Confirmation classes – Fifth and Sixth. I was one of four boys in Second Year who had not been confirmed. We attended special classes, and were confirmed in the nearest parish church, which was in the village of Golden, in County Tipperary, about 4 miles from the school. It was a feature of the Confirmation ceremony of the time that the child (usually aged, as I was, 12 or so) would "take the pledge"; this involved solemnly undertaking not to ingest alcohol before the age of 21. Most boys of the time, and not a few girls, blithely forgot about the pledge in their teenage years. In this regard, however, to use a form of parlance which was in vogue at the time, I did not let a single drop of alcohol past my lips; thus, my experience with alcohol in those 10 years or so was very different to my relationship with My Lady Nicotine (upon reaching 21, however, it is noteworthy that I began to make up for lost time – of this, more anon).

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Rockwell, at that time, was a boys-only fee-paying school with more than 500 students. It was run by the Holy Ghost Fathers (known in more recent years as Spiritans). As mentioned earlier, there was a separate catering school. The only direct connection between the two was the unfortunate interaction, referred to earlier, involving the kitchens and refectory. Most of the students in the main school were boarders, like myself. There was a small number of "day boys", children from the surrounding area who did not board. Then, there were the "Scholastics". These were boys of whom it was expected that, upon completion of secondary education, they would proceed to the Novitiate of the Holy Ghost Fathers with a view to becoming priests. Realistically, it was anticipated by the school authorities that probably fewer than half of them would do so. They boarded and had meals in a separate house – St Joseph's – within the campus, at some distance from the main part of the school. They attended classes and took part in sports with the rest of us. Their fees were at a reduced rate. Perhaps inevitably, there was a certain degree of snobbery towards them; in the Ireland of that time, the situation in the school would have been quite exceptional had it not been

so. Indeed, within the main school, this was a phenomenon which was also sometimes to be observed. As with the inverted snobbery which I had encountered in primary school, however, it was more covert than overt, and only ever exhibited, in my experience, in a relatively mild form.

The top three positions in the hierarchy of the school at that time were President, Dean of Studies and Dean of Discipline. The rôles were filled, for all of my six years in Rockwell, respectively by Father Finnucane, Father Joe Nolan and Father Aidan Lehane. The President, a rather austere figure, was rarely seen by the boys apart from ceremonial occasions, such as Prize-Giving Day. In our final year in school, he entertained us, a half-dozen or so at a time, to dinner in his quarters, where the food was of a quality far superior to what we were accustomed to the refectory. He has left, and certainly by comparison to the other two men, very little lasting impression on me or, I suspect, on most of my contemporaries.

Father Joe Nolan also had an air of austerity about him. A tall man, with steel rimmed glasses and a commanding presence, he could be quite severe, and he exuded a natural authority. When one got to know him even a little, however, other qualities were evident. He had a deep humanity, with an abiding sense of fairness and a great empathy with the boys who were in his charge. 45 years after I first encountered him, when I was appointed to the bench and I determined to take on board in my new position the best I had observed in people in authority over the years (and eschew the worst), his innate gravitas, his dignity, and his ability to project a manifest quest for achieving just outcomes were very much to the forefront of my mind.

Father Nolan's nickname amongst the boys was "Soapy Joe", or, more usually, simply "Soapy." Almost all the teaching staff, lay and clerical, had nicknames. It is often the case, and especially in schools, that nicknames are malicious, and intended to denigrate their bearers. Racking my brains, I cannot recall any that came into this category in my time in the school. "Ding Dong" was how everybody knew erudite and mildly eccentric Father Campbell, who always took charge of dramatic productions; Father Hurley, who taught French, was known as "Pére". Father Comerford, the school vice president, was known as "Whitewash." He was pale of face, and had a quavering voice – something which was imitated endlessly in an exaggeratedly outrageous fashion by many of us boys. Mimicking of the voices and notable traits of staff members was very widespread. Mr Hayes, a history teacher, had a very strong South Tipperary accent and walked with a highly distinctive loping gait whilst simultaneously rubbing one hand over the other; his favourite word was "infernal". He was, without doubt, for all these reasons, the most imitated of all members of staff, and he carried the soubriquet – how it was acquired, I cannot recall – of "Gerry the Bash."

Nicknames were also common among the boys. Again, I cannot recall any that were actuated by malice but, boys being boys, there must have been exceptions. Most nicknames were, like those of players in rugby squads in these times, derived from surnames. Thus, David Houlihan, a classmate from my second year in Rockwell onwards was, like his two brothers before him, known to us all as

“Hoolie.” Similarly, I discovered when I arrived in school that my brother Eddie was known to all as “Teo” and, very quickly after arriving in the school, I was “tarred with the same brush.”

The nickname for the Dean of Discipline, likewise, came about in this way. Father Aidan Lehane (rhymes with naan, rather than train) who was known to the boys as “Hanners”, was a man who was probably in his late 30s to mid-40s during my six years in Rockwell. Lithe, fit and energetic, he was particularly knowledgeable about rugby, and trained the SCT during all of my six years. As Dean of Discipline, he frequently had to present a stern and forbidding front; this inevitably led to periods of sometimes deep unpopularity among the generality of the boys, and the corporal punishment which he (and, indeed, father Nolan) handed out was never less than painful. Nonetheless, his urbane manner and engaging personality left an impression among most of us which was deep and, for the very most part, very positive.

A few hours after tea in the evenings were given over to studies, when homework was done and lessons were revised. There were different study halls for the different academic years. For each of us, Friday night studies were interrupted for half an hour, during which we were addressed by Father Lehane. These lectures could loosely be termed “life lessons.” During the years of his tenure, thousands of boys benefited from his instruction. Rules about social interaction, letter writing, and table etiquette were among the topics covered.

One subject which greatly exercised him, and upon which he spent a good deal of time in those Friday night talks, was smoking. It was, of course, very much against the rules of the school for all except Sixth Year boys (who could only indulge the vile habit in one designated room in the entire school), and this rule very much chimed with Father Aidan’s views on the subject. I well recall one Friday night occasion when he actually lit a cigarette, then held a white handkerchief in front of his mouth and blew out the smoke; the unsightly brown residue on the handkerchief spoke louder than words. On another occasion, he held up a teacup and informed us that smoking 20 cigarettes per day for one year would have the effect of depositing a quantity of tar, which would half fill that receptacle, in one’s lungs. By the early 1960s, research had shown an unmistakable link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer; the link to heart disease had not as yet been made before I left school but, even without that nexus, Father Lehane’s strictures against the dreaded weed were sufficient to persuade both my head and my heart that I should kick the habit. Alas, I tried a number of times to do so during my years in secondary school, but the flesh was weak.

Perhaps the phrase which was heard most often during those Friday night talks was “a sense of what is fitting.” The aim of the authorities in the school in those years was to mould the character of the boys so as to turn out Christian gentlemen. In essence, the test as to whether that had been achieved could be distilled into those few words. Certainly, they resonated with me time and again over the years since I left school in 1967. About half a century after I had done so, I got a congratulatory letter from Father Aidan on my appointment to the bench; in responding, I was

happy to confirm this fact to him, and I am certain that he heard similar sentiments from a great many others over those intervening years.

I have often heard people reflecting on their school days, and remembering a particular teacher who inspired them to a lifelong love of science, a language, drama or whatever. I had a number of very good teachers in both primary school and secondary school, but none that I could point to in that elevated way. When I think back to those days, Father Walker often comes to mind. He was my English teacher for a number of years and, under his tutelage, I came to have an appreciation of the beauty of the English language, and a regard for correct usage (it is worth pointing out that my generation was among the last to learn the rudiments of English grammar as part of the school curriculum). Father Walker was, however, something of a "fuddy-duddy," to the extent that he could never be remembered as an inspirational figure. More so than with any of the teachers, it was the character and charisma of the two Deans which have left a deep and abiding positive impression.

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During the second term, I fell ill with pneumonia. After a few days in the infirmary (where I was in the wonderful care of an American nursing nun, one of the very few females in the school, a widow whose husband had been killed in Pearl Harbor), it was decided that I would recover better at home. I cannot recall how long I was at home (I think about two weeks, and this may have led into the Easter holidays), but I do recall that my parents discussed taking me out of Rockwell and going to the CBS school in Kilkenny, a day school. For all that I was unhappy boarding in Rockwell, I fiercely resisted the proposed change (looking back on it now, I can only conclude that this was on the basis of "the devil you know"); after lengthy discussion, my wishes prevailed: I was to return to school, and then to repeat Second Year.

Repeating the year proved to be a success. I was now of similar age to most of my classmates and, from the beginning, had a bit of an edge academically and in terms of know-how in school affairs after the experience of the previous year. Moreover, I found my new peers to be a more congenial group than those I had started out with, and the fact that the new group was less academically gifted than my previous classmates was not to my disadvantage. A year is a long time at that stage in life, and being both physically and emotionally stronger gave me a good psychological boost. I was now Number 8 on the under 14's, a position which suited me much better than prop forward, and from this time on I began to enjoy my rugby.

My last 5 years in the school were a great deal happier than the first had been. Apart from the – admittedly, fairly major – issue of food, and notwithstanding the rather spartan conditions under

which school life was lived, things were going my way. I began to take part in drama productions. After rugby in the first 2 terms, athletics held my interest between Easter and the summer break. Sprinting was what I found I did best. Although I was not the fastest boy in my year, I was among the top few, and winning a few races in the school competitions I found to be a major boost to my self-confidence.

In 1964, in my 3rd year in the school, I became part of the school junior 4 x 110 yards relay team (this was long before metres replaced yards for most such events). Running is perhaps the most individual of all sports, but relay running requires an exceptional level of coordination between the individual team members; 3 smooth transfers of the baton at high speed can often be sufficient to enable a team of less talented runners to get the better of a team which is individually faster. We practised hard and continuously to achieve the level of coordination required. We easily won the event in the East Munster Sports, which qualified us for the Munster Sports event, held in the Mardyke in Cork, where we were again successful. This meant we were in the happy position of having qualified for the All Ireland Sports, held at the same Cork venue. In all 3 events, I was extremely nervous beforehand; happily, this worked to my advantage, in that the adrenaline which was released seemed to give an extra edge to my speed; happily too, both switches of the baton (I ran the 2nd leg of the 4) went well on all three occasions. Alas, we were narrowly pipped for first place in the All Ireland event by the team which we had beaten into second in the Munster Sports – North Monastery, of Cork. I ended up with 3 medals, one of them an All-Ireland silver medal. While I haven't looked at them for years, and while what they represent is hardly of cosmic significance, I am very glad to have them, and the agreeable extra boost to self-confidence which a young teenager got from having won them is something I can still remember.

During school holidays, I was quite busy. In primary school, I had started to read a good deal; Biggles and Just William books were my favourites. In secondary school, I would like to be able to say that I read a lot of classics. Sadly, this was not so. I did read some Dickens, and I also read some non-fiction, particularly history, and some sports books. The bulk of my reading, however, (and I developed a real love of books in those years) consisted of whodunnits by Agatha Christie and thrillers by Alistair Maclean. Then, in my late teens, I discovered the alternative reality created by the peerless PG Wodehouse. Then, and ever since, the world he created has provided a ready refuge for me (and countless others) from harsh reality. Characters such as Psmith, Jeeves, Beach the butler and Bertie Wooster have had me chuckling, snorting and, at times, howling with uncontrollable laughter. Such is Wodehouse's art that the seemingly effortless entertainment almost masks the magisterial elegance of his prose. Of very few writers, apart from Joyce, can it be said that they have such a mastery of words that they appear to be writing "within themselves" – i.e. having the capacity to produce even better work, should they be inclined to stir themselves; for me PG Wodehouse is in the ranks of this tiny elite.

In school holidays, a lot of time was also spent playing sports. The creamery had a field at the back which it was not using. My younger brothers and I and some friends (Eddie spent a lot of time during

holidays with our de Loughry cousins in Kilkenny) erected makeshift goal posts and a net (chicken wire!), and played soccer there. In another part of the field, I put together a pitch and putt hole, using highly sophisticated technology – clippers and a trowel. In wet weather, and in winter, we played table tennis in a dilapidated spare room on the top floor of our house. For the first couple of years, the entire financial outlay consisted of purchasing one ping pong ball; as with the outdoor sports, lack of funds dictated that necessity should be the mother of invention and books, stood on their ends side by side, took the place of a net across the middle of a table with a far-from- even surface while, again, books took the place of bats.

Soccer in the back field was confined to working days in the creamery. On summer evenings and Sundays, we played in the creamery yard. Sunday mornings could be a bit problematical in this regard; many farmers in the 1960s did not have cars, and several came in from the country for Mass in horse and cart or pony and trap; these, they invariably parked in the creamery yard. The animals were sometimes less than pleased when a ball would roll in under their hooves!

In those days milk was still, in those parts of Ireland where dairy farming was carried on, brought to creameries every day except Sunday by the dairy farmers. Cars, vans, tractors and horses were used to pull the trailers, onto which was loaded the milk in sizeable churns. At the busiest time of the morning, the queue of farmers with this cargo would stretch out of the yard where the platform for unloading the milk was located, onto the street in front of our shrubbery, and around the corner into Barrack Street (where, quite unknown to me then, my future wife had her abode!). Bringing milk to the creamery was for farmers who, like most Irish people are of a gregarious disposition, a valued social outlet. Sadly, in the mid-1960s, it was a phenomenon which was in its dying days.

Farmers were paid for their milk on the basis of the amount of butterfat found in their produce. Once a week, this was tested. When the farmer emptied his churns into the receptacle behind the platform, a sample was taken. It was for this process that I was engaged over a number of summers while I was in my teens. This, my first-ever job, came about through nepotism – my father was responsible for taking me on. I would take milk from each sample, place it in a test tube, add some blue drops, take a butterfat reading, and record the result in a ledger opposite the farmer's creamery number. I don't recall the level of remuneration, but am fairly satisfied that the amounts involved, were they ever to become public, would be unlikely to lead to a clamour for a public enquiry.

The proliferation of creameries in Ireland at the time was something which was beginning in that decade to be looked at critically. They were all co-operative entities and most, if not all, came into existence in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries when the co-operative movement was one of a number of momentous movements which swept through the country in ways which radically altered it. Castlecomer Co-op started in 1913, while – as we have seen - the co-op to which my maternal grandfather was secretary must have had an earlier origin. My father and Reddy Brennan, managers

of Castlecomer and Muckalee respectively, were the most active in County Kilkenny in seeking alternatives to the existing arrangements; the multiplicity of creameries was in distinct contrast to the situation in Denmark, another largely agricultural country, with a population comparable in size to Ireland, and with only six creameries in total. The Danish model was seen to be considerably more efficient. The two managed to persuade a number of their colleagues in and around North Kilkenny, and their and their own co-op memberships, to come together to form a large and more efficient unit.

Thus came into existence, in 1966, Avonmore. My father and Reddy were on the first board and Reddy, the younger man, became its chief executive. Today, it is an enormous international company, called Glanbia, and yet it in part retains a co-operative element. It was the first of a number of such entities established across the country but it remains, I believe, the most successful.

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My final two years in school, Fifth and Sixth Years, were extremely busy ones. I joined the English Debating Society in Fifth Year, and I still remember vividly preparing for my first debate. The motion for debate was something along the lines of "that girls should be allowed into the school for dances and other events". I was assigned the ludicrous task of opposing the motion. I prepared carefully, taking time to write out my entire speech on a number of small pages. By the time the debate came round, I needed to refer to the notes very little. I managed to inject a little humour into the speech. Nervous beforehand, the nerves fell away when I was on my feet. Afterwards, I was gratified by the number of people who came up to me to say how much they had enjoyed the speech (praise from any quarter – fellow students, teachers or parents – was quite rare in those days). I continued to debate, and in Sixth Year became Auditor – i.e. chief bottle-washer – of the English Debating Society.

I also did some Irish debating. I was one of a team of three, and we spoke in a number of debates against other schools, in Clonmel. I organised and took part in a number of concerts, even composing an introductory song for one of them. I acted in a one act drama in a production, under the direction of Father Campbell, and after our performance in a drama competition (somewhere outside the school –the venue, again, was Clonmel) we received a critique from Martin Dempsey, a noted stage and television actor of the time. I became Sports Editor of the Rockwellian, the school magazine (duly contributing my fair share of clichés), which was under the editorship of my classmate Gabriel Rosenstock, who later went on to some prominence as a poet and author in the Irish language.

In sports, I continued to have some very modest success in athletics during the summer terms, but not in any interschool events. Most of my attention was concentrated on rugby. In Fifth Year, I captained the Third Seniors (the senior school turned out seven teams, graded in ability from the SCT to the Seventh Seniors). In Sixth Year, I captained the Second Seniors. I was part of the SCT squad, and a substitute for all of their matches, but did not get to play a Senior Cup match (in those days, substitutes were only allowed for medically-certified injuries).

All rugby-playing schools have an anthem, and also songs and chants which are delivered – invariably with much gusto – before, during and after matches by supporters. In my final year in the school, I was one of three or four cheerleaders who stood in front of the rest of the boys at senior or junior cup matches, and who would initiate and orchestrate such methods of support for the players on the pitch. In Sixth Year, I even composed a new song to be added to the supporters' repertoire; I now can remember almost none of the lyrics, but can recall that they were decidedly sub-Yeatsian; they were to the tune of the song of the US Marines, and I recall that the finishing line was the deathless "…and we're marching on to victory, in the colours of the white and blue". While it is something I recall with some embarrassment, it is true nonetheless that neither the school anthem nor the other songs, which by then had been hallowed by long usage if nothing else, would be in danger of being included in any serious anthology. And the fact that I could be at the same time a cheerleader and a substitute on the SCT was its own testimony to the small likelihood of my being called onto the pitch; it would be many years before substitutions without rigorous scrutiny became the norm.

In Sixth Year, in addition to captaining the Second Seniors, I was captain of the under 17's. This was the age grade in between Junior Cup and Senior Cup levels. The competition we played in (and, in importance, far below the level of either of those competitions) was called the O'Brien Cup. Unlike the other two, which were straight knockout competitions, this was on a league basis. We won all four of the matches that we played, and were given walkovers in the other two. The cup was presented to me by Father Lehane in the Refectory, shortly after our last match, in front of the whole school; the rest of the team and I were also presented with medals.

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1967 was a year that I look back on with great fondness, and particularly in a sporting context. Celtic, from Glasgow, a team I supported, won the European Cup in soccer. The precursor of the Champions League, it was probably more prestigious than the latter in that only the champions of the competing countries could participate, and some of the clubs that Celtic beat (including Internationale of Milan in the final) were considerably wealthier. An even sweeter win was that by Kilkenny hurlers in that year's All-Ireland final. I watched the match from the Cusack Stand, and was very proud that my first cousin, John Teehan, put in a storming performance at centrefield for Kilkenny. The real "cherry on top" was that the losing team was Tipperary. "Rivalry" seems almost

too effete a word to describe the relationship between the counties in a hurling sense, and Kilkenny had not beaten the old enemy in the Championship for a full 45 years (indeed, from that day onwards, the animus was raised by another notch; Tommy Walsh, one of the best Kilkenny players and still in his early 20s, lost an eye from contact with the butt of an opponent's hurley; his career ended that day, and Kilkenny supporters have nursed a grievance ever since. For all its apparent ferocity, serious injuries such as this are very rare in hurling, and many believe that the contact which occurred was not accidental, although only the most diehard – and there are, it must be said, quite a few in this category, mostly living close to the Tipperary border – feel that the consequence was intended).

In Rockwell sporting history 1967 was, without question, the most successful ever. In addition to our success with the Under 17s, Gabriel Rosenstock (my classmate – mentioned earlier – who edited the "Rockwellian") captained the school team which won the Munster Tennis Cup. There was a huge win for the athletics team, which captured the coveted Royal College of Science Cup at the All-Ireland Schools Sports for the most successful school overall. To add to all that, there was even more glory on the Rugby field.

Only those students who have been to rugby-playing schools can appreciate the passion with which the various provincial cup competitions, generally played for between late January and St Patrick's Day, are contested. A great many players who have represented Ireland at full international level would gladly trade a number of such caps for a schools' cup medal. The sense of excitement and anticipation running through the whole school as a big cup match approaches is impossible to convey to anyone who has not personally experienced it, and winning a cup can induce a lifelong glow for students who support the winners and, particularly, for team members.

To win the Munster Cup in 1967, the SCT would have to beat the three traditionally biggest rivals. Christian Brothers College, Cork were dispatched in the first round, Crescent College, Limerick (after a replay) were seen off in the semi-final, and the biggest rivals of all, Presentation Brothers College, Cork, awaited us in the final. This was in the famous Thomond Park, Limerick, on St. Patrick's Day. There was an enormous outpouring of joy when, at the final whistle, Rockwell led by six points to nil.

The term "feel-good factor" has become hackneyed in recent years. It would not have been familiar to us in 1967, but it sums up the euphoria felt by the whole school, from the President down to the scrawniest second year. Not the least elated was myself; there is a photograph in the Rockwell College Annual, 1967, of team captain David Houlihan being triumphantly chaired into breakfast the following morning, with yours truly providing one of the shoulders; the fact that this success was achieved by a team composed almost entirely of my friends and fellow-sixth years in the year we were to bid farewell to the school and each other, and the fact that I captained the team which was known as "The Opposition" and played against them in training matches, meant there was an extra layer of sweetness for me to the winning of the cup.

A few days later, we travelled to Cork for the final of the Junior Cup. This could never rise to the same pitch of excitement and commitment generated by the senior final, but our victory meant another enormous boost to school morale. One of the photographs of which I am most proud shows the other four captains and me with our trophies. This level of sporting success for one school in one year may never have been equalled or surpassed and, more than half a century later, that still brings a warm remembrance.

Prize-Giving Day always came just before the end of the school year, in late May. It took place in the concert hall, where the whole body of students assembled, together with the teaching staff. The President of the School presided; The President of the past Pupils Union was always present and, sometimes, there was a dignitary to present the prizes.

In the main, the prizes handed out were for academic achievement. The principal prize, however, and the last to be presented, was the Union Medal for General Excellence, donated by the Past Pupils Union. It was given to somebody in Sixth Year who, in the view of the school authorities, had excelled across a range of fields. It was highly prized, and it was not handed out lightly; I recall that, in 1964, it was deemed that there was no suitable person who met the criteria, and no medal was awarded. It was not something that one applied for. The mechanism of the decision-making was opaque, but probably consisted of the two Deans and the President having informal discussions, consulting other staff members on occasion.

From the beginning of Fifth Year, speculation began among my classmates as to who might be the recipient on Prize-Giving Day 1967. Apart from myself, nobody else was seriously in the running. The speculation often took place in my presence, and numerous people – sometimes, individually and sometimes in groups – told me that they thought I would get the award. Over the course of the two academic years, the speculation grew in intensity and, particularly in the last month or so before the big day, it reached what tabloid reporters would call “fever pitch”. If I walked into a room, or passed a group on a corridor, somebody would pipe up “Gold Medal, Teo”, and then others would take up the refrain. I never took part in any of the discussions, save to say, on occasion, that I thought it would be a repeat of 1964. This is what I genuinely thought. Of course, I would have liked to win the medal but, not having been on the SCT, and not having been outstanding academically, I reckoned that no medal would be awarded. The breadth of other activities in which I was involved might possibly stand to me, I thought; on balance, however, I thought that the odds were against me.

The big day arrived, and I was none the wiser as to what might be the answer to the big question. The President of the Union in that year was Senator John Nash, a solicitor from Templemore County Tipperary. He was a significant figure in politics, being on the Ard Comhairle (National Executive) of the Fianna Fáil Party. The dignitary who would present the prizes was Archbishop Tom Morris of the

Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly (by reason of holding that office, incidentally, he was also Patron of the Gaelic Athletic Association, being a successor in office of Archbishop Croke, one of the founders of that body about 80 years before, in a meeting which took place in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, the seat of the archdiocese; he was on this account a major figure on big GAA occasions in those years).

The President, Father Finnucane, addressed the gathering, welcoming the guests and delivering the sort of platitudes which are a staple of occasions such as this. Senator Nash then spoke, recalling his own schooldays and contributing a few platitudes of his own. All the while, my anxiety was rising, with negative and positive feelings vying for supremacy. Father Finnucane then started announcing the various prize-winners in each year, starting with Second Year, and the favoured ones came forward, one by one, to receive their prizes from Archbishop Morris. At last, there was only one (possible) prize-winner to be announced. I still remember the intense feeling of anticipation hanging in the air before the announcing of my name could be heard; I remember, even more vividly, the wild cheering, particularly from the front of the hall where we Sixth Years were sitting; I had the distinct impression that a lot of people were really rooting for me, and the sound was all the more exceptional when contrasted with the polite applause which greeted the previous awards; it went on from the announcement of my name, to my making my way to the stage, to the handshake and presentation of the medal by Archbishop Morris, and until I resumed my seat. The medal bears the crest of the college on the front, together with the school motto, and the words “Rockwell College Union Medal”; on the back, it is inscribed “General Excellence 1966-67 Thomas Teehan”. I take it out about once every five years or so to have a look, and the memories it evokes are always pleasant. A photograph of the presentation appeared a few days later in the local paper, The Clonmel Nationalist.

A classmate, Sean Carter, had a video camera, and used it quite extensively to record various scenes during our last academic year. Subsequently, he put together a compilation of some of the images called “Rockwell in the 60s”. Cameras of that era had nothing like the sharpness of today’s models, and much of the camerawork was amateurish. Nonetheless, Sean’s piece evokes a particular time and place, and before seeing it a couple of years ago on You Tube I thought I would never be able to revisit that time and that place in such a manner. Among the scenes depicted is one taken in the quadrangle beside the concert hall immediately after the prize-giving ceremony: I am being scragged by a few classmates, before (shamefully) lighting a cigarette.

Reflecting on my six years in Rockwell, I considered that I was fortunate in the education that I got there. The school was for teenage boys, and only boys; inevitably there was machismo, inevitably there was roughness, inevitably there were petty squabbles. However, there was no culture of bullying in the school, either from staff (with the notable exception of Father Lavelle), or among the boys. The coarseness that was to be found among the boys was a pale shadow of the baseness and vulgarity that are to be found in so many areas of life today. In my time there, in addition to academic studies, rugby, athletics and tennis, activities in the school included boating on the school’s lake, basketball, golf, Gaelic football, hurling (in 1967, the year of the many sporting

successes, the school senior hurling team reached the final of the secondary Munster hurling cup, but lost narrowly), FCA, orchestral music, choirs, and a number of very high quality dramatic productions. With so many priests on the staff, religion was regarded as being a central part of our education. While I myself, guided at least in part by what was imparted to me in secondary school, have remained all my life a practising, if not a good, Catholic, this part of the process was not nearly as successful as it could and should have been. The biggest failure, in retrospect, was in not getting across to the boys the enormous positivity, the joy, the comfort, the richness inherent in living the Catholic faith. There was an undue emphasis on the negative and, by the time it came to leave the school, many of my classmates were either wavering, or lost, to the faith. However, when I bump into schoolmates from that era, I am constantly struck by the fact that, almost invariably – and whether or not they still have the faith – they exhibit the values and the ethos which the authorities in the school in the 1960s tried to inculcate in us. In my time in the school, we had boys from England, America, Trinidad, Egypt, the Netherlands, Australia, France, and Africa. There can hardly have been another school in Ireland at the time (when our country was one of the least cosmopolitan places in the Western world) with such a mix of races and cultures. Without any nudging or preaching from the staff, we all mixed comfortably; I do not recall a single incident of a xenophobic nature during my time in the school.

For myself, the overall experience was a positive one. While boarding school is not for everybody, I was fortunate in finding it beneficial for my own development. Independence and self-reliance are characteristic of a great many boarding school products, and in this regard I was no exception to the rule; had I not been a boarder for the course of my secondary school education, I doubt that these traits would have been developed by me to anything like the same extent. And the minor successes and achievements in my time in Rockwell were a distinct help in bolstering a fragile self-confidence.

In contrast to a great many young people at a similar stage today, my classmates and I left school with at least a basic understanding of both English grammar and correct pronunciation. Father Lehane's Friday night talks imparted to us a reasonable acquaintanceship with the protocols of dealing with a number of scenarios likely to be encountered by us in life and, in general, with a level of social skills which most of us were unlikely to learn in a home environment. For these, alone, we have good reason to be grateful.

Most accounts I have read of school experiences have been authored by bookish people; most bookish people are not sporting. Time and again I have read of teenagers with an aversion to sport being sent – usually by parents wishing to "toughen up" their offspring – to a boarding school where sport was paramount. There is almost a sub-genre of literature dealing with the misery of a spindly youth being required, on pain of severe punishment, to don sporting gear, regarding with horror the mud and dirt of the sporting arena, and seeking at all costs to avoid the indignity of physical contact with more athletic and robust peers. In any large group of boys, there will inevitably be a few who are not sporting. I cannot now recall whether sport and, in particular, rugby was compulsory in my time in the school; I rather think it was and, if so, there may even be in print accounts from

contemporaries in Rockwell which fit the prototype I referred to. One of the great advantages of team sport is that it engenders team spirit. When true team spirit emerges, the team becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and the individual within the team takes as much pride and pleasure in the accomplishment of team mate as in their own achievements. And while team spirit is associated with team sport more than any other context, it is far from being confined to that one area. In my time in Rockwell, I was part of teams which produced high quality drama, engaged in debating competitions, and produced the school newspaper. Most of my colleagues in these endeavours were not athletic, and many had little interest in sport, yet the same team spirit was to be found as on the rugby field. Whenever, in life, I have encountered it since, I have cherished it.

In saying all this, I am far from asserting that I was not an unformed and, at times, gauche 17 year old. Laughably, I recall that, at that time, I considered myself quite mature (indeed, with a good deal more experience under my belt at age 70, I would be a lot slower to think of myself now as “quite mature”). Certainly, I was far from being a dashing boulevardier.

In mid-June 1967, Leaving Certificate completed, I left Rockwell behind and prepared to embark on an entirely new phase in my life.