

with me.” My father brought me down to meet the teachers and a nun. I introduced Shep to the nun, who promptly went off to get him a biscuit. That is how he signed himself on for the next seven years as ‘Carer’ to me and my new friends and made himself a great name in the entire district. Today he might even be paid an allowance for it!



*Patricia, 1936 after surgery*

Another school crisis arose when a Schools’ Medical Team came when I was about twelve. Half the class were sent off to part with their tonsils. The other half were told to go to the Dental Hospital. I was told to go to the Orthopaedic Hospital in Merrion Street to see about that leg of mine. My hopes rose high because of ‘Granny’s Dream’; it had never faded. For once the step-mother lost out and had to take me across the city. There I met a wonderful doctor, Mr.Somerville-Large, and a great sister, Sister Mahon. I never forgot their names. We got papers to come back on a certain date for an operation. I knew this, but my father was not told. I never found out what he was told. Anyway he had that 20th century male attitude to hospitals; that was - that they were places where you went in to die and not to be cured or improved – and that was that! So Granny’s dream went down the tubes once more. But I made a vow that I would finish my school, get as many certificates as I could, get a job, save up and get treatment somewhere.

After my Intermediate Certificate I went to a commercial college for a year. Then I answered advertisements galore, sat the Civil Service and Dublin Corporation examinations, etc. I was thrilled to bits when I got a job in the Brown Optical Institute, 27 Pearse Street, because that was where Patrick Pearse’s family lived before it all happened, and of course we were all immersed in the lore of 1916 at that time. I was only six weeks there when I was called up to the Civil Service. I passed the oral Irish examination and then forced myself to turn up for ‘the medical’. Oh, the questions – “How many in your family? How many died? What did they die of?” and of course the doctor had to see the old leg. Amazingly, I was passed through. Maybe he said to himself, “Well this one is all right from the neck up.” So I was appoint-

ed to the Department of Agriculture which, at that time, was situated in Upper Merion Street. It was an amazing place for a raw young Dubliner, who had lived an isolated, house-bound life for so long. It was for me a kind of kaleidoscope of recent history which I loved, where numerous well-known characters passed by.

In my Section I was 'the young one' and a very nice woman from the North took me under her wing. She promised to get her brother who was a doctor to have "a look at that leg of yours" when he came home from England on holidays, a kind offer totally unsolicited. He did and said that he knew the best place to go but that I would be away for about a year, which was a long time for me. I was a very timid person then, you see, but while I was mulling over it all one day, I suddenly got this brain-wave: 'That little old hospital' to which I had never been returned when I was twelve years old - why not go over there to see if Mr. Somerville-Large was still there and Sister Mahon and seek advice? This I did, and the doctor was very anxious to operate himself; but he told me that I would have to enter the hospital as a fourteen year old. He said "You look about eleven or twelve." So this indeed came to pass and I was within half an hour of the operation when all hell broke loose in the kitchen. Someone had told a committee member that there was an 'over-age' in the hospital.

Poor Mr. Somerville-Large was nearly crying and he was very angry too. But he told me not to worry. He was writing a letter to the surgeon under whom he studied. I would go to him in Dr. Steeven's Hospital and I would be all right. So that is how I finally landed into the care of Mr. Arthur Chance. Granny would have been very proud of this great man and indeed, of Mr. Somerville-Large too. It was so great to have her 'Dream' come to realisation.

Now before me I had sixty good years in snazzy shoes with not a distorted boot in sight. I learned to play tennis, to run and to swim. I climbed mountains, cycled all over the country when my aunt got me my first bike, and after the Second World war I started to travel and managed to see all over Europe and parts of North Africa on holidays.

Mr. Quinlan of St. Vincent's and Cappagh Hospitals, another excellent surgeon, operated on my foot in 2000 and did a very good job. In Cappagh a lively walk-around patient came to my bed, took off her Walkman, slapped it on my head and said, "That's your disease, listen to it." On the radio was Joan Bradley talking about the Post Polio Support Group, which I have since joined.

# Noel

I am now aged 79. I got polio when I was 18. I lived in Dublin with my mother. I was treated in Mercer's Hospital for six weeks by way of massage, hot baths, etc. I was eventually left with a considerable weakness in my left leg, which, of course, became worse with age.

As a young fellow I was very keen to join the Royal Navy. However, I knew I would have a problem with the medical entrance examination because of polio. Luckily, instead I got into the Merchant Navy because the medical for it was not so strict. I was employed as an engineer on merchant ships from 1948 to 1990 (42 years) and then I retired.

The polio legacy did affect me at times during my sea-faring career, but not so much as a senior engineer. I got by, however, and travelled to many parts of the world in the course of my work.

Now I will add another interesting little story! In November, 2005, I was not feeling too well but still enjoying my retirement. Following tests in hospital I was diagnosed with internal cancer and subsequently had a major operation in January, 2006 for the removal of a tumour. I am gradually getting back to near normal; it is a long road. I must thank again our friends in the Post Polio Support Group for their help.



*Noel on board Irish Fern, 1957*

# Barbara

## My Early Years with Polio

**I**n the early fifties, when I was two years of age, I got the polio virus. I was sick at home in Lettermore, Connemara, for a while; and the doctor was not sure what was wrong with me. I was sleeping all the time. He sent me to hospital in Galway.

I have no memory of leaving home. It must have been awful for my family, not knowing what was wrong with me. After a few days, however, they were told it was polio. The hospital ward was to become my home for the next three years. I had the run of the ward. The doctors and nurses spoiled me and used to take me out for walks around the grounds. I cannot recall much of my stay there, but at times I get flash-backs of smells and white sheets which bring me right back to the ward. I have a vague memory of helping other patients. I know my father used to visit me when he could. When I think back on it now I realise how difficult it must have been for him.

I have no memory of travelling back home. All I remember is the nurse bringing me into this strange house where there were lots of strangers staring at me. I had no idea who they were or why the nurse had taken me there. I was up in her arms; and when she tried to put me down, I screamed my head off and asked her not to leave me. She didn't know what to do as I didn't want to let her go. It must be the biggest nightmare for any child to be taken away from those who had cared for her for three years and then to be left in a house with no familiar faces. I cried all night and my family tried to comfort me.

I found it strange having to share a bed. Our house was small and we had a big family so everyone had to share. I can't imagine what it was like for my mother. How she coped I will never know, having this 'alien' landing on them. However, I think I was a novelty to them all for a while!

As well as being taken into a house where I knew nobody, I could not understand a word they were saying to me, because my family spoke Irish! I had been speaking English in the hospital. Fortunately, my parents knew a little English; and, after some time, the younger ones could speak a few words. Eventually I began to learn and speak Irish and I fitted in well with my family.

I used to have lots of problems with my callipers. I had one long one and a short one. My father was forever fixing them. He also made me a small commode. My parents tried to make life as comfortable as possible for me.

Later on I had to go for check-ups, which I hated. On the day, I used to make myself sick so I would not have to go. Another thing I remember is, whenever an ambulance came around the area, I used to get upset and think it was coming to take me away; so I used to hide.

When I was nine years of age I was off again, this time to Cappagh Hospital in Dublin. Surprise, surprise – I had no English this time! I stayed there for two years and had a good time. I remember we all had to go to Confession every second Saturday. I had to confess in Irish because I did not have a word of English. I went from one extreme to another. It is no wonder I was a confused child!

Most of this information I got from my family.

# Ted

**M**y name is Ted. I got polio on 15th August, 1956, in Bandon, Co. Cork. Two days before that I was playing 'kiss and chase' with my friends, where the girls would try and catch a boy and kiss him. Now, at eight years of age in 1956, I would rather have had my finger nails pulled out; so I climbed up a tree, but unfortunately a branch broke and I fell about four or five feet onto my back. Next day my neck was very stiff and I was hot and sweating. My mother took me to see the doctor who said I was okay and just to take me home and put a hot iron on my neck. Mother was not happy with this so she went to the chemist, who said it could be polio that I was getting. So back to the doctor again, who was not very happy with her getting a second opinion, and told her to do what he had said the first time. She did not put the hot iron on my neck.

The following day I could not get out of bed, I felt so sick. Father came home from work that evening with the newspaper, *The Cork Examiner*, which said that there were three new cases of polio in Cork that day. I jumped out of bed and ran across the floor, shouting, "I do not have it." I do not remember any more until I woke up in St. Finbarr's Hospital. I spent three weeks there, can remember nothing about it, and was then moved to St. Mary's Orthopaedic Hospital, Gurrabraher, where I spent the next year and five months. Mam and Dad used to try and visit me every week, but it was very hard as there were very few cars at that time. When we had visitors we usually shared our parcels.



*Ted with his parents,  
Confirmation Day, 1960*

I think there were about thirty-four boys in the ward with me - all ages, from two years to sixteen or seventeen. I can only say that I enjoyed my time there, as there were some great characters. I made some very good friends and remember them to this day. One of the lads, called Pat, used to play the mouth organ. One night he got on our nerves, so when he was asleep a few of us stole it and put a sausage in it. When he went to play it the next night he nearly choked himself. Matron was called and we got told off, but it did no good.

Another time there was thunder and lightning. Someone got the idea that if you had a bedpan, the lightning would hit it and you would be killed. So out of bed a few of us got, crawled along the floor, collected some bedpans and put them under the bed of some poor fellow who was in a plaster-cast - more trouble!

Some of us were shifted to Block 3 where I saw my first black man, he was a Doctor Fox. One of the boys, John, had gone down to theatre early that morning for a minor operation and hadn't seen this doctor on his rounds before. When he woke up a few hours later and saw the black face looking down at him, he shouted "I'm dead and the devil is looking down on me." We all thought it was a great joke.

During this time I had lots of physiotherapy and, when my legs got stronger, I was fitted with two callipers. It was a bit of a shock to be standing up after spending months in bed. When I got steadier on my feet I was let out in the grounds with my friends. We used to go up to the Watch Tower with the lads in the wheelchairs. They would get out and sit on the steps at the top of the slope and we would get in and bomb down to the bottom. This was okay unless 'Winnie the Witch' was watching. She was the matron and that's what we called her. She was very small and thin and wore a cape over her uniform. If she caught us she would really be cross, but to us it was only fun.

Night-time was the best because you did not have your callipers on. We would get out of bed, roll up a few pairs of socks into a ball and play football. This was taken very seriously and we had rules just like in the World Cup. As soon as lights were out we'd start our game. Some of the nurses were okay if you did not make too much noise; but there were a few who were strict and, when they were on duty, we didn't play.

We all had our favourite nurses - mine was Nurse O'Sullivan. I was also fond of Mrs. Roche, who was a cleaner. I think we used them as substitutes for our mothers. If you got sweets or biscuits you would share them with your favourites.

Eventually I learned to walk again with two callipers and crutches and was let home. When I went down to the local shop if there was any old woman there she would buy me sweets or ice cream. So whenever I saw one going into the shop, I was down like a shot!

After a few months I went back to school and, because I was two years behind everyone else, I had to stay back. I know Mrs. Murphy, the teacher in the hospital, did her best with us, but I think a lot more could have been done. I had to make new friends, as the old ones had moved on. For the first few days no-one would come near me as I think they were afraid they would hurt me if they knocked against me, but they soon got used to me.

After being home for about three years, I had to go back into St. Mary's Orthopaedic Hospital in Gurrabraher again for an operation, as my left foot kept turning in and tripping me up. Two of my friends were there from my first time and, after a few weeks, some more of the lads arrived. It was great to see their faces again. By this time we had quietened down quite a bit. Mrs. Murphy, the teacher, was still there and when she saw us all together again, she aged about ten years. Poor woman, we broke her heart. Whenever her back was turned we would be off playing cards or push-penny. I think she gave up on us in the end.

A lot of the nurses were the same ones who were with us before. The nurse I really liked was called Bernie from Charleville. She was also called 'The Jap' as she was olive skinned. I was really daft about her. All she had to do was tell me to do something once and I did it. She wheeled me into the theatre for my operation. I do not remember any more until Mr. Moore came in to see me on his rounds the morning after. First thing he said was, could he "be my best man." All the junior doctors and nurses started to laugh. I didn't know what he was talking about. One of the nurses told me after a while that when I came out of the theatre I kept telling Bernie I loved her and wanted to marry her. I kept on at her until she said 'Yes'. I don't think it would have worked as I was only eleven and she was about twenty-five! I got a lot of slagging for a few days after that.

I now had a plaster of Paris on my left leg and a very strong plaster on my right one with weights on it. It was very hard to sleep like this with the weights; so you slid down the bed and let them rest on the floor. For a laugh, some of the lads would get out of bed when you were asleep and take one or two weights off one lad and put them on yours, so when you tried to push back up the bed in the morning, the extra weight would keep pulling you down. There would be uproar then, because when the lad who had fewer weights went to pull up, he would go flying up the bed.

Another trick we would play on each other was - if someone was out around the grounds or had gone for physiotherapy, we would loosen the knobs holding up the back of his bed and put the pillows back nice and tidy. When he returned and lay back, the back would fall down and he would end up half out of the back of the bed. We, of course, didn't see any danger; it was just a joke to us.

After a while I was walking around again, and the local Legion of Mary came and said they would take some of us to Mass down in Gurrabraher. We were to go down in wheelchairs as there was a very steep hill down and a very hard climb back up. Some of these people were okay, but others were real 'Holy Joes' and took us down very early so we could pray to get cured. All most of us wanted, was to go to the shops outside the gates of the hospital. We would have lists as long as your arm for sweets, crisps, biscuits and minerals, not forgetting comics for yourself and the lads back in the wards. Some of the Legion men were real pains in the butt, so what we would do was - when they were pushing us back up the hill, we would put the brakes



*Ted on 'adapted' bicycle, 1958*

on a little bit. By the time we got to the top of the hill the poor guys at the back were nearly dropping. Then we let the brakes off as soon as we got to the shops. When we returned to the ward we gave out all the treats. Of course if you were having visitors you did not buy anything, as they would bring you all you wanted.

The Boy Scouts called to the hospital too and asked if we would like to join. About ten of us did, as it was another way of passing the time. A scout leader would call in once a week at night and teach us all about knots, first aid and Morse code. All we wanted to know was how to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together and would they give us knives! However, they only gave us scout shirts and scarves. We went on an outing once to Fota Island where there was a Scout Jamboree. We thought it was great and wanted to stay there for the night, but we had to come back to the hospital.

I made my confirmation in hospital. Mam had got me a new suit, but the pants were too long and had to be taken up. My parents were told the ceremony was at 12 o'clock, but the right time was 11 o'clock. Luckily the gateman saw them walking up to the hospital where I was all ready, waiting, but with no pants! We just barely got to the church in time.

I did not enjoy hospital as much the second time, as I was older and there was a faster turnover of patients. A lot did not have polio. I got out at the end of May and went back to school. I was not kept back this time.

I went to physiotherapy once a week in Bandon Hospital and was advised there to get a bicycle, so we got one. A man in Cork fitted two side wheels on the back. It was like a tricycle. It helped greatly. Then it was suggested that I go horse riding. Now in the 1960s nobody had horses, only the very rich. There was a man who had a donkey and said I could ride it. Where Dad worked, his boss had a saddle for a pony, and he gave it to us. At night I would take off my callipers and go on my bike up to where the donkey was kept. Dad would put me up on the saddle and off we would go, Mam on one side and Dad on the other. All went well for a few weeks until someone put some female donkeys into a field on the road where I went riding. My donkey was a male, so when he saw the females, off he went, me holding on for dear life, Mam and Dad running after me. They just got me off his back in time before he got into the field. That was the end of my horse riding!

After I finished school I got a job in an Optician's. I was in the workshop and stayed there for thirty-three years. I retired eight years ago.

People often ask me am I angry because I got polio so young. My answer is: if I got polio in my hands as bad as in my legs, I would not be able to dress, drive or get a job. I made some great friends whom I never would have met if I did not get sick. I also say there is always somebody else worse off than yourself, so look on the bright side of life.



*Ted (centre back row) with boy scouts, Fota, 1962*

# Liam

My Surgeon – Mr. Boyd Dunlop – who died in 2005

**S**oon after I was diagnosed with polio around March 1959, aged eleven months, I came under the care of Mr. Boyd Dunlop, a very kind man. My two legs were severely damaged and my left arm was also affected, but to a lesser extent. I spent over four and a half years in the Orthopaedic Hospital, Clontarf, where he performed many operations on my legs. He finally got me walking without any aids, except surgical boots and a calliper on the left leg.

He was a man who took a keen and personal interest in his patients. It was not just a job to him, it was a passion. I remember to this day the advice that he gave my parents when I was very young. He said my legs would only be able to carry a certain amount of weight so I should watch my diet and stay slim. He was right. In my forties I put on a bit of extra weight and it affected my mobility. Now I am always careful and keep my weight down.

He was strict but only because he knew what was best for us. As a child you felt he was like a second father. As an adult you could see the concern in his eyes as he treated his patients and performed medical procedures.

In the early 1970s Mr. Dunlop's clinic was growing and growing and he was not getting any younger; consequently, he had to transfer many of his patients. I was one of them, and I regret to this day that I did not keep in touch with him. However, I will always remember him.

Finally, an amusing little anecdote which I think captures many things about Mr. Dunlop's personality and the relationship he had with his patients: humour, fatherly interest and how he examined even the most mundane things from a doctor's viewpoint. When I was visiting his outpatients' clinic in Merrion Street one Wednesday afternoon (I was about 7 or 8 years old) I arrived in his surgery with my mouth packed with a generous amount of bubble gum. Of course I was non-

chalantly chewing away, despite the fact that I was now sitting on his doctor's couch ready to be examined. Mr. Dunlop said "Liam, may I ask what type of gum you are chewing?" I proceeded to tell him (it was the cheapest I could buy). He quickly informed me that the best chewing gum was Wrigley's and that I should refrain from chewing "that rubbish". He kindly asked me to postpone the activity and wrap the gum.

Needless to say, as much as I was fond of him, I was none too happy with this recommendation from the great surgeon; I was very reluctant to part with my gum. But then my mother intervened and said that if I binned it, she would buy me more – Wrigley's of course! This seemed like a good deal to me; consequently, like lightning, the gum was binned. I did see him trying to hide his face from me, with a little smile thereon, no doubt musing about the eccentricities and follies of young boys.



*Receiving Room, Cork Street Hospital*

# Frank

**M**y first signs of impending polio were on Thursday, 12th December, 1946, when I experienced skin irritation in the lumber region, followed by increasingly severe back pain on the following day. I was 25 years of age. The next day (Saturday) I experienced violent headaches and the pain spread to both legs. By Sunday I was unable to stand and the GP was called. I was transferred by ambulance to Cork Street Hospital, Dublin, arriving in the early hours of Monday morning, 16th December, there to stay until 14th June, 1947.

The hospital's official title was 'House of Recovery and Fever Hospital' and to it all fever cases and those requiring isolation (other than TB) were referred – except for some (including some in the polio epidemic of these years) who were sent to Verge-mount Hospital, Clonskeagh.

The buildings were mostly over 100 years old. One was built to accommodate the wounded soldiers coming back from the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Another – even older – was built to house sufferers from 'The Fever', but the records did not define which fever this was. During my stay there, the staff was made aware that it was planned to transfer the hospital, when money permitted, to Cherry Orchard, then a greenfield site beyond Ballyfermot; but they had to wait many years for this to happen.

At one stage, Dr. Christopher McSweeney, the Medical Superintendent, said to me, "Frank, we know very little about this disease. You have it; you can describe it to us. You can tell us every day what changes you are experiencing; and if you have any suggestions to help us and you, please let us have them." I observed that two problems interfered with exercises in bed – the pull of gravity and the pull of bed clothes. I



*Frank with walking frame/crutches, Cork Street Hospital, 1947*

designed a contraption to overcome both, and Dr. McSweeney had it made. It became known as the Balkan Frame, after something similar used in the Balkans.

When I arrived, there were perhaps 24 patients stricken with polio. Some were to leave greatly improved, while others were to die, being replaced by others.

To be on the staff of a fever hospital required more than usual dedication, as everyone ran the risk of infection from patients. The result was a particularly selfless staff, from the medical superintendent, Dr Christopher McSweeney, and the resident medical officer, Dr Fergus O'Herlihy, through all the junior doctors, and especially the sister in charge of the Polio Wards – Sister Margaret McCarthy and the physiotherapist, Miss Monica Keenan.

(Frank died in 2005 and the following was written by his son, Philip)

### My father had Polio

My father had polio; a simple statement, but for me and for my brother and sister growing up, a much less significant experience than it was for our father. In fact, for many years we did not really know the implications that contracting polio had had for him. To us, all we knew, when we were old enough to have been told, was that he had been sick when he was a younger man. This meant that he had one leg that was a little thinner than the other with wasted muscles; and, consequently, he had to walk down the stairs one step at a time. I clearly remember the curious sound he made as he walked down stairs. He also had a rather unusual way of operating the brake and clutch pedals in the family car but still managed to get around like anyone else, pushing us in our prams, go-cars and tricycles. Occasionally, he used to use a stick when walking; but that was a rarity in our young lives.

Apart from that, but to a large degree unrecognised by us as children, there was the fact that he could not play any sports with us. He could not kick a ball, or run, or engage in strenuous exercise. But to children, this was just seen as what parents did; they watched and encouraged you to do these things, but they were 'too old' to do it themselves!

What we initially did not appreciate, but later came to realize quite forcibly, was that his experience of polio was leagues outside of our own more limited experiences. Both



*Frank suspended in 'sling' Cork Street Hospital, 1947*

my brother and I had been in hospital for a week with different childhood illnesses; in my case tonsillitis, in his case meningitis; and we thought this was a really long time, as we were both five years of age when it happened to us. When he told us that he had been in hospital for six months, we really thought that it must have been awful. Later, when we were adults, and he told us more, we appreciated just how dreadful it must have been, even for someone who was (when he contracted the virus) twenty-five years old. I think that Dad locked away the worst aspects of that experience, just as men a generation earlier had lived with, but rarely expressed, their memories of war. The analogy is quite accurate since Dad sometimes talked in his later years (and with some emotion) of the people he remembered who did not survive the 1946 polio epidemic. I recall being riveted when I heard the testimony that he gave on an RTE radio programme in the late 1990s on the 1946 epidemic, when he spoke of the Christmas Eve that he spent in the hospital and the impromptu carol service he organized with many of his fellow patients, some of whom would not survive into 1947.

Apart from some stories, (and Dad was never short of a sentence or two!) that was all we knew of polio in our childhood years. It did not prevent Dad from doing many activities outside the home. As well as putting in a full day's work, in the traditional 'bread-winner' manner of the times, while our mother was home, both of them were

very active in amateur dramatics; and many evenings and weekends the house was full of other adults, all learning their lines and using the front room for their rehearsals. The effects of the polio were not at all evident as Dad not only acted in many of the plays, but directed as well. We would often be picked up after school and driven by Dad to a local hall halfway across the country, where the play was performed that evening, and then back late at night, home to bed. This exertion did not in any way seem to be a problem for Dad, despite his polio. Indeed, as we grew up we also got involved in these productions, both amateur and, during the late sixties and into the seventies, professional.

A complicating factor, which probably weighed more heavily with us, was that our mother, Celia, had heart trouble for most of our lives, and was sick more often than she was well. I remember her going into hospital when I was twelve, for a very major operation. In fact, it was a heart valve replacement and, given that this was 1967 when heart surgery was much less developed than now, was indeed a major life or death operation. Dad was able to support her and shield us from the implications, just like any other father. We only knew that when Mum was sick, Dad would be able to cook up a meal, keep us clean and tidy, get us out to school and still go to work every day. Most of our contemporaries' fathers, who were in the full of their health, didn't cook; and we thought Dad was just great. We certainly didn't realise that he was in any way 'handicapped' - much the reverse.

It was only in much more recent times with the onset of Post Polio Syndrome and when we children, now adults, had long since left the family home and set up our own households, that Dad really suffered from the effects of his polio. We now know how blessed he had been, to be able, despite his experiences in Cork Street Hospital, to overcome the effects of polio and re-learn how to walk. I have to say that probably looking back he developed his strong stubborn streak from his strength of will in defeating the polio, when others perhaps had succumbed. We just thought that he was stubborn and didn't suffer fools gladly! On the other hand, perhaps it was genetic since none of us, his three children, are exactly known for our timidity!

Overall, our experience of living with someone with polio was not by any means unusual, nor particularly harrowing or difficult. We found from Dad's life that, despite the troubles that the world throws at you, you can overcome them and go on to realise many achievements. That probably is the best lesson that anyone who lived with polio, as we did, could have learned.

# Thomas

**I** was born in 1936 in a little village in West Waterford. I had a carefree upbringing which involved playing in the fields and bringing water from a public well. I enjoyed going to school and left when I was sixteen. I then went to work on a farm and, after one year, in November, 1953, I contracted polio.

I was brought to the Fever Hospital in Clonmel where I was not allowed any visitors. My whole life changed and my system broke down. I remember being terrified to ask what was wrong with me. After a few weeks I was brought by ambulance to the Cherry Orchard Hospital in Dublin where I stayed for five years. The first two of these were spent in bed.

I had physiotherapy every day along with exercises in hydro baths. I started to improve and then was moved to Cappagh Hospital where I had my ankles fused to help me to walk again. At long last I was able to return to County Waterford.

I soon realised I could not do anything in the work area or make a living for myself. A public health nurse got me into a Rehabilitation Centre in Galway for four years. There I learned to make furniture and other things. Some very nice people employed me along the way. Later I went to the Central Remedial Clinic where Lady Valerie Goulding got me into the jewellery trade. I am pleased to say that I worked in that trade for twenty years.

I got married and I have a twenty-four year old son whom I adore and a lovely granddaughter. I learned very early on that I had to stay focused and to this day I know that this is what got me through. Nowadays I am learning to paint and to use computers. I learned to drive a car and have had seven new cars. Now I am boasting! I could not finish this story without paying tribute to all the doctors and nurses and to all my post polio friends.



*Thomas with granddaughter, Robyn, in 2000*

# Hugh

## From Westmeath to the West

**I**t wasn't called Polio in the 1940s when I got it. I never heard it called that until the mid-1950s, when there were epidemics of it around the country. Until then I generally heard it referred to as, 'Infantile Paralysis'.

I was born in Co. Westmeath in the very centre of Ireland. An 18th century stone column on a hill visible from our house is said to mark the exact centre of the country. In 1944, when I was only 11 months old, I was struck down by polio. At first, doctors were unsure of a diagnosis. Scarlet fever was suspected so I was rushed off to the fever hospital in Mullingar to prevent it spreading to others. Having survived the acute stage, I was referred to an eminent specialist in Dr. Steeven's Hospital in Dublin. He carried out surgery to my left hip which, to this day, has baffled those who have tried to figure out what was done and why. Anyway, by the end of the recovery stage of the polio, I was left with one leg almost completely paralysed and the other paralysed below the knee. My arms, which were affected for a time, recovered fully. As a child, to enable me to learn to walk, I had to wear a splint – all steel bars and leather straps – on the 'bad leg'; and, by the time I was 6 years old, I was well enough able to get around to allow me to go to the local school. Although I was two years older than average school starters, I soon caught up with those of my own age.

As I was growing, it became apparent that the deformities of my feet as a result of the polio were becoming more severe and, if this continued, a time would come when I would no longer be able to walk on them. The District Nurse who visited the school informed my mother that there was now a clinic attended by an orthopaedic surgeon held alternately in Athlone and Mullingar Hospitals and that this might be beneficial to me. The surgeon, Mr. De Wytt, always seemed to me to be strange. His suits were always very flamboyant and dapper and, when carrying out examinations on patients, he seemed to talk very loudly in a slightly strange accent to nobody in particular. It was some time before I realised that he was talk-

ing to a dictation machine located on top of a cupboard in the room. I believe his 'strange accent' was from South Africa. Mr. De Wytt proposed surgery to correct the feet deformities. This was carried out in St. Joseph's Hospital in Coole, Co. Westmeath. The surgery proved to be very successful. I never understood why I spent so long (nearly a year and a half) in the hospital but, on the whole, it was a happy time for me. My primary education continued while I was there so, when I came home and returned to the local national school, I was still on a par with my classmates from before I went to hospital; and I had learned to do proper joined-up writing while they were still writing in childish block letters.

When a child, I was encouraged to exercise the 'bad leg' as much as possible. Since walking while wearing the splint would not exercise the leg, and I couldn't walk without the splint, my parents initially got me a tricycle. While this was good, I had the ambition to ride a bicycle. There was a small bicycle at home, which my brothers and sisters rode until they outgrew it. The problem was that I had to take off the splint to ride the bike, but I couldn't stand up beside the bike without the splint. The situation was solved one summer when there were two large barrels in the yard – one filled with bluestone (copper sulphate) solution and the other with washing soda for spraying the potatoes to prevent blight. The barrels were about 5 yards apart. I propped the bike against one barrel to mount it. Then I 'launched' myself towards the other barrel. If I got there, I 'launched' myself back to the first barrel. If I didn't make it, I just got a few bruises and tried again. Eventually I was able to make it from one barrel to the other nearly every time, so I got the urge to venture farther. When I tried it, I found that I could ride the bike unaided. The only problem was that I couldn't get off the bike unless there was a wall to stop against. The first time I ventured out onto the road on the bike, I cycled until I came to a hill that was too steep for me. There was no wall to stop against – only a briar hedge. I had no alternative but to fall into it. However, the realisation that I could ride the bicycle far outweighed the bumps and scratches. In due course, my parents saw that I should have a proper bicycle and got me a new green one. I fitted a milometer to it and over the next few years I clocked up thousands of miles. It achieved absolutely nothing for my 'bad leg' but it got me very fit otherwise.

After primary school I went to secondary school at Carmelite College in Moate, Co. Westmeath. Without the distraction of playing football or other sports I got on quite well at my studies. During this time, as I was nearing adulthood, the inci-

dence of breakage of the leg splint increased. Each time it broke I was completely immobilised until a temporary repair was carried out by the local blacksmith. The orthopaedic surgeon said that the solution to this would be to fuse the knee so that it could not bend but would serve as a prop under me. However, this could not be done until I was fully grown. Accordingly, shortly after I had done the Leaving Cert exam I was admitted to the Orthopaedic Unit of Navan Hospital where the knee was fused.

Five weeks later, on two crutches and with my leg in plaster, I started studies for a degree in architecture in University College, Dublin. It was quite a difficult time for me but one of the more pleasing discoveries I made was how helpful people can be to those whose need for assistance is apparent. For example, buses would stop for me between bus-stops when the drivers got to know my routines. That was in 1963. It wouldn't happen now!

I graduated from UCD with a B. Arch. Degree and shortly afterwards joined the Office of Public Works as an Architect. After some very happy years in Head Office in Dublin, the OPW appointed me as Regional Architect for the Galway/Mayo Region, based in their Galway Office. I remained there until I retired in 2004.

In the 30 years from 1963 to 1993 I enjoyed excellent health and in over 32 years in the OPW I never took even one day of sick leave. In Galway I became a regular all-year-round swimmer in the sea and, while I was never a very fast swimmer, I was noted for my endurance. I also went rowing every Sunday from April to November – nine miles each time.

But about 1993 I began to notice significant loss of strength and stamina. All through my life I had become used to tripping and falling, but I would always land on my hands which would prevent me falling flat on my face. Now, with the new weaknesses, I found that whenever I fell my arms were not able to support me; and it was very difficult to get up again. Then, in 1994 during the Football World Cup competition in USA, while waiting for a late-night match involving the Irish team, I saw a trailer for a documentary on Sky News Channel about polio survivors in the USA experiencing new problems and weaknesses decades after the initial onset of the disease. They called it Post Polio Syndrome. As I watched the programme, I realised that this was what was happening to me at the time. I consulted with a neurologist who confirmed after examinations and tests that I was

affected by Post Polio Syndrome/The Late Effects of Polio. At the time I felt that the rate of deterioration was so rapid that I would be confined to a wheelchair within about two years.

About that time also I was diagnosed as having acquired Type 2 diabetes. Ironically, I received this discovery as good news because I understood that, when diabetes is effectively treated, the symptoms – including loss of strength and loss of stamina – are likely to be reversed. This proved to be so in my case – although not as rapidly as I had expected. Thus, for a few years, the improvement due to control of the diabetes cancelled out the deterioration due to the PPS/LEP and now, 12 years after the first signs of the new weaknesses, I can still get around on my pins. How long this will last, only time will tell.

People have asked me how did polio and the Late Effects of Polio affect my life. This is an impossible question to answer. Certainly it pointed me in some directions and prevented me from going in others. Without it I might have been an Olympic champion at something or I might have become some kind of gangster, a captain of industry or a wino. Who knows? I know I have the doggedness to stick at something until it's finished – said to be part of the 'polio personality'. As Magnus Magnusson used to say, "I've started, so I'll finish", to which I sometimes add, "even if it kills me!" Polio people tend to strive to maintain their independence as much as possible. Thus, when the late effects begin to manifest themselves and they might benefit from a little bit of outside help, they are reluctant to seek assistance from others and may have difficulty in accepting it when offered. When anyone offers me help, e.g., to carry something for me, I always accept. In this way we both benefit. The person offering the assistance feels good about having it accepted and I benefit from the assistance itself. Remember the line from the song: "He ain't heavy, he's my brother!"

# Jackie

**I** was born in July, 1957, and in August, 1958 I contracted polio, just thirteen months old. Since then I have known nothing different. I have always walked this way, I have always had limitations on my activities, so, what has been the difference in having polio?

It is hard to say really what the difference is. I spent my formative years in Clontarf Hospital – from thirteen months to three years of age. When my mother and father came to visit, I called them ‘the man and the woman’. All my baby photos were taken in hospital and, until recently, I never displayed them; but now they have pride of place in my home, and if anyone cares to ask, I am only too happy to tell them where they were taken.

As a result of my polio I have a shorter, thinner and weaker right leg. Due to this weakness, my left leg has had an awful lot of extra work to do. However, now as a result of Post Polio Syndrome, it too has begun to be affected.

I went to school when I was nearly six years of age and never thought I was any different from the other children in the school. The fact that my sisters pushed me there in a go-car till I was eight did not seem strange to me. I joined in all the activities, even though I always came last; it did not matter to me somehow. I finished school in 1975 and started work immediately in Crumlin Children’s Hospital, as a clerical worker. The majority of my working life was spent doing secretarial work for hospital consultants which, in hindsight, seems rather strange. I was very comfortable in that setting.

Throughout my early twenties I was very active in a hill-walking group, whose members included those with learning disabilities; this pastime I found very rewarding in more ways than one. When we hill-walked, we all went at our own pace – we may have taken longer to get to the top of a mountain, but we got there and that was the aim of the exercise. We also took on the tasks of rock-climbing and canoeing, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Each of these activities lasted in the region



*Jackie in Orthopaedic Hospital, Clontarf,  
aged 2*

of two to three years before my body decided it had had enough; that being the case I moved on to something else. What I found most rewarding was that I could get as much out of an activity in three years as some people did in a lifetime. Then, as a result of my experience, I was able to introduce many able-bodied people to these sports,

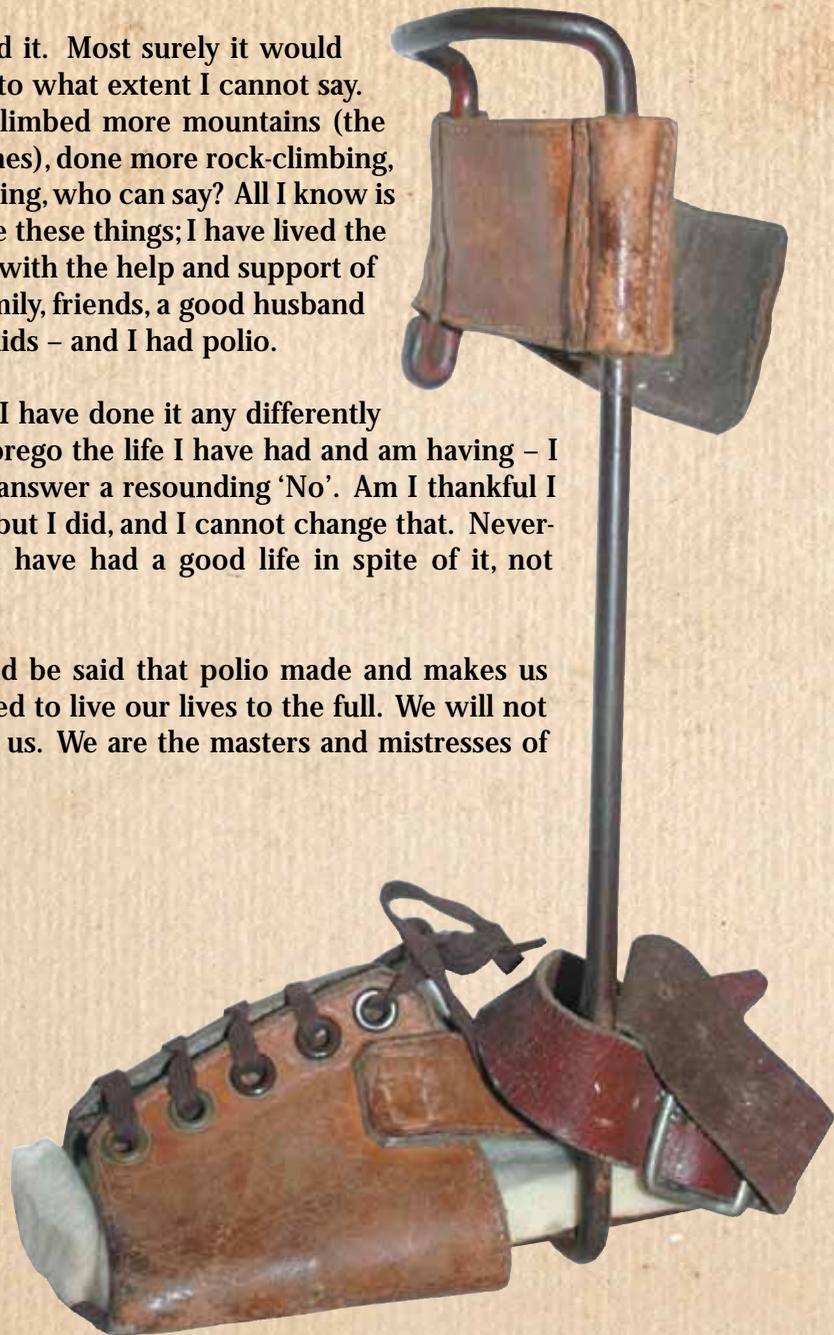
I married in 1990 and have two wonderful teenage children who accept me for what I am. My disability has most definitely been a part of their lives due to my involvement with the Post Polio Support Group and also my gradual slowing down in activities and the necessity for me to use more aids and appliances. When I first decided to use my wheelchair on an outing to the Zoo, I was very aware of my status in a wheelchair, whereas my kids had the time of their lives pushing me around, and at one stage, nearly pushed me into the lake. They too have had to share the responsibility of my disability, as has my husband over the years, because of recurring symptoms and fatigue.

Having contracted polio at such a young age I am unable to say if my life would have been different had

I not contracted it. Most surely it would have been, but to what extent I cannot say. Would I have climbed more mountains (the geographical ones), done more rock-climbing, canoeing or sailing, who can say? All I know is that I have done these things; I have lived the life I was given with the help and support of a wonderful family, friends, a good husband and two great kids – and I had polio.

If asked would I have done it any differently – meaning to forego the life I have had and am having – I would have to answer a resounding ‘No’. Am I thankful I got polio? No, but I did, and I cannot change that. Nevertheless, I feel I have had a good life in spite of it, not because of it.

Perhaps it could be said that polio made and makes us more determined to live our lives to the full. We will not allow it to beat us. We are the masters and mistresses of our own fate.



*Jackie's 'night' calliper worn when she was five years old,  
(now a National Museum of Ireland object)*

# Brigid

**I**'ve lived with polio for 60 Years

I was a very bright and happy little girl of 13 years, looking forward to starting my secondary education. I had the ambition of becoming a primary school teacher or a nurse, but, alas! *Man proposes but God disposes*. On 1st September, 1946, I got a flu-like illness, severe headache and backache. I was put to bed, and next morning could not move my legs. The local doctor was called and I was diagnosed to be suffering from infantile paralysis or polio, as it is commonly known.

Arrangements were made for my admission to the Fever Hospital in Naas, where I spent eight weeks in total isolation. I was confined to my room due to the infectious nature of my illness. Visits from my family or friends were not allowed. I was permitted to receive letters from home, but any letters I wrote had to be copied by the nurse before being sent out of the hospital to my family, who lived 28 miles away. I remember being given books to read by the staff, one being - What Katie Did.

At the end of that period I was sent to Dr. Steeven's Hospital in Dublin where I spent 10 months. My treatment there was mainly massage and electrical stimulation of the muscles in my legs. Slowly I regained some power in them and was able to walk with the aid of two crutches and a splint. I was discharged from hospital in July, 1947.

Going back to school was not an option for me. I was unable to climb steps or stairs; that finished my education! I had one great friend at home – a hand sewing machine. With the aid of a paper pattern I made myself a lovely dress. On seeing it, a neighbour asked if I would make dresses for her new baby, which I did. As a result of that I started a little business and went on to make wedding dresses, first communion dresses, curtains, etc.

I had further treatment, including surgery, at Cappagh Hospital from 1950-1954, which greatly improved my condition.

I am now one of Ireland's many polio survivors who is experiencing Post Polio Syndrome. I am an old age pensioner living alone, quite happy, and have many interests and hobbies. I enjoy reading, conversation, card playing and antiques. I have a particular interest in mahogany furniture. I love travel and have been to Lourdes seven times. Salthill is a special place for me and I spend two weeks there every year. The highlight of my week now is my trip to the Day Care Centre at Maynooth every Thursday.

Recently I joined the Irish Wheelchair Association. Their bus collects me twice weekly and takes me to the John Sullivan Resource Centre in Clane. There I attend pottery, art and computer classes, all of which I enjoy very much.

I have been blessed with a positive approach to my disability, and no one has ever heard me complain, as my motto is: *What cannot be cured must be endured.*



*Official opening of Central Remedial Clinic, Clontarf,  
Dublin 1968*

# Paula

**I** was born in Kolar, South India in 1948, just after India got her independence. My Dad was a doctor attached to the medical centre for the Kolar Gold Field, which was at the time the deepest goldmine in the world, with men working 4 miles underground.

I was their third child; and when I was nine months old, they decided that the political situation in India was getting too unstable and they returned home. The journey at that time was by sea through the Suez Canal; it must have been a long and arduous trip with three small children, and the story goes that I cried and cried. At first they thought I had a flu, but then when Dad was changing my nappy, he noticed that I was not kicking my legs – and it struck him like a ton of bricks that it was polio. Some ton of bricks! It seemed a cruel fate for them that they were so nearly out of India, but not, unfortunately, soon enough for me to escape polio.

As soon as they got to England, I was brought to Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital where I was put in an iron lung. Mum stayed with me, and Dad continued back to Ireland with my brother and sister. When the acute phase of the disease was over and we returned to Ireland, I was brought to an elderly orthopaedic surgeon with old-fashioned ideas, who told my parents to take me home and bring me back when I was twelve and my bones were fully grown. This advice was very strange and it is just as well that I have forgotten that man's name! They did take me home and my feet were twisted in because of unequal muscle strength. My right arm was also affected as well as my breathing. Most of this story so far has been told to me by my family, but I can remember waking up in the night crying and, because I was so young, I could not explain why I was crying, which must have been very difficult for everyone. I heard later that Mum and Dad would take turns to get up with me at night and soothe me as best they could.

Then, when I was six years old, I was in the hospital outpatients' department for something altogether not connected with polio; and Mr. Dunlop, that wonderful sur-

geon who was involved in the setting up of the Central Remedial Clinic, happened to pass by. On seeing me he told my Dad that if I wasn't operated on as soon as possible to straighten my legs and feet I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

Well, that galvanized things and before the end of the week I was on the way to the Orthopaedic Hospital in Clontarf. I can remember that day so well; I was not allowed to keep anything belonging to me. I was put into a hospital nightie and even my favourite teddy had to go home. My Mum was very upset; I can still see her going out the door of the ward, I couldn't understand then why she was crying. I hated being in hospital and could not eat the food and started to lose weight. To this day I cannot look at tapioca, or 'fish eyes in glue' as we used to call it. My Dad would come in every day that summer and would bring me strawberries and cream which, I suspect, is what kept me going. Other sounds and smells still overpower me with feelings of dread, such as the smell of plaster of Paris, which sends me into a decline, and the sound of a rattling trolley coming down the hall, which reminds me of enemas being administered before operations.

So began my long road to rehabilitation. I spent the time between hospital stays attending the Central Remedial Clinic. In fact, I was one of the first patients to attend the Clinic in its first home - Kathleen O'Rourke's flat in Pembroke Street. Many hospital stays and twenty-one operations later, I was able to walk - first without crutches, and then without callipers; and when I was seventeen was discharged out into the wide world with what everyone thought at the time was a stable level of disability.

During this time I attended school and all my friends treated me just like 'one of the lads'. Because I wore boots and callipers, I was exempt from wearing gym shoes, which was obligatory for everyone else, so as not to mark the parquet floor. At the end of each term we had to polish the floor under our desks and my bit of floor was always marked and scratched. I was made to feel terrible about this, and my Dad made overshoes for me out of an old deerskin rug, to try and keep my boots from marking the floor. I was always falling and was a constant visitor to the first aid station, where lots of 'gentian violet' and huge plasters would be applied to the wounded knees. In spite of all this, I got on well at school and was head girl in my final year.

Being a teenager brought its own difficulties; but, like many polio survivors, I got around things and at the dances would change from my boots into fashionable slip-on shoes in the toilets, and then shuffle around the floor without a problem. It was only when it got to changing back into the boots when someone offered to take you home that things got a bit tricky!

I became an occupational therapist and worked always in the psychiatric field as I soon realized that I was unable to lift and mobilize physically disabled patients. I met and married a lovely Galway man and have four fantastic children. I got on with life, discovering how to make up for muscle weakness by using other muscles. I left occupational therapy to work with my husband in the catering business, where we worked very hard and brought up our four small children.

In hindsight, I pushed myself physically too much; and, when I was about forty, I felt myself getting weaker and had great difficulty in getting through the day. I was also suffering from fatigue and would go to bed at every opportunity. I could not understand what was wrong with me. I heard a talk on the radio about Post Polio Syndrome and every symptom described on that programme was what was happening to me; so I went to a rheumatologist who told me it was 'old age' and that Post Polio Syndrome did not exist. Old? At forty? I don't think so! So I went to a neurologist and was actually very relieved when the diagnosis of PPS was made.

I joined the Post Polio Support Group and gradually learned how to adapt my life to my condition and look after myself. I drive an adapted car and have an electric scooter to get me around the shops. My home is also adapted for disabled living and I have learned to save my energy for the things that matter and leave the rest. My family is a great support; and, as I approach my sixties, I look forward to many more years of good health and vitality. I am a survivor!

# Catherine

**I** was twelve years of age when I contracted polio. The doctor diagnosed mumps and went on holiday. I lost the ability to swallow anything but water. Another doctor thought I was faking and ordered me to get out of bed. I rolled over and fell on the floor.

At the hospital the chief medical officer was on holiday and the covering doctor said I had sleeping sickness. I was in a ward where many were dying. I was given the Last Sacraments but could not answer the priest's questions because my voice had gone, also my vision. I could hear my family weeping as they gathered around my bed. I had an out-of-body experience and immediately recovered the use of my left side and vision. The first thing I saw was a bunch of gladioli lying across my chest.

Recovery was slow. I abandoned the thought of ever going home. The daily routine included walking around the grounds of the hospital where the main entertainment was trying to see in the windows of the diphtheria unit, where we were forbidden to go. We speculated wildly about the patients there.

Being suddenly discharged was not the joy I expected. Relatives and friends crossed the road to avoid me fearing I might still be contagious. Other children jeered the cripple. I taught myself to walk unaided.

Having missed a lot of schooling I got a tutor and passed the entrance exam for Trinity College at 16. I went through medical school, graduated, married and had two children. I did further studies in the US and became a professor at State University of New York. I skied with my children, played golf, did voluntary work and numerous other activities.

However, in 1986 I noticed I had a problem climbing stairs. While carrying a basket of laundry, I lost my balance and fell backwards. Thinking this was just a freak accident, I dismissed it but continued to have falls and other difficulties.

I tried to cover it up as much as possible and used distraction to cope and deal with the increasing pain and injuries, some of which required surgery. None of the doctors seemed to realize what was happening to me. I continued to work hard, play golf and tennis and look after my family. I had to prove I was normal. Then I heard about Post Polio Syndrome and knew that this was what I was experiencing.

How am I doing now? Well, I joined the Post Polio Support Group in 2005 and am adjusting with the help of physiotherapy. I have not been able to see a neurologist yet.



*Cherry Orchard Hospital.*

# Patty

**I**n 1958 I was living in rural County Meath and was the third eldest of a family of six children. It was a very hot summer; and in the month of August, being a very energetic ten year old, I spent my days out of doors. While climbing a tree one day I fell and hurt my back and head. I recovered from this accident but shortly afterwards I got a severe headache. My mother associated it with my fall. When the dreadful pain reached my neck and arms I could no longer hold my head up nor lift my arms. Next day I couldn't stand up. I had to be fed and all our neighbours gave a diagnosis or remedy to cure me. My mother sent for the doctor. As all this happened within a few days, she thought I just had a cold or something not too serious. After examining me the doctor took my mother aside and I could see her crying. I was told I was going to the Cherry Orchard Hospital in Dublin. I knew I was very ill as I could hear all our neighbours and family talking about me.

The ambulance duly arrived and I was carried out amid tears and signs of the cross being made on me and I was sprinkled with holy water. Arriving at the hospital I was met by a team of doctors and nurses who did all sorts of tests, examinations and the dreadful injections that were to be part of my life for the next few months. I had never been in hospital before so, as well as being in pain, I was also terrified of everyone, and wanted my mother so badly to be with me. I nearly choked as masks were put on my face to help me to breathe.

The very week I went into my ward a small boy died in the bed next to me. I overheard the nurses saying he had polio and I, being a bright child, worked out that was what I also had. I cried in terror as I thought - this is the ward you die in. The injections were so frequent my legs were very sore where they were given. As well as coping with my constant terror of nurses and doctors and thinking I was going to die, I had to endure painful enemas, being sat on bed pans, undressed and examined and being spoon-fed. I was bored, with nothing to break up the long bleak days of suffering. I couldn't understand that, due to financial difficulties, my parents could only come up to Dublin very rarely. I felt abandoned by them too. When they did visit, because I was in isolation, they

could only stand outside my window and shout in at me. It was so upsetting for me, but I can only imagine how my parents felt.

As paralysis replaced my awful pain I was then made to endure painful physiotherapy and exercises. I befriended Kathleen, a girl of my own age in the next bed, so had someone to talk to. I received letters from home and they made me very sad as I didn't know if I would ever see them again. I gradually got the use of my head and arms back, but I was still bed-bound after four months.

I was then informed that I was being transferred to Coole Hospital in Co. Westmeath. I had to leave my now familiar surroundings, my pal, Kathleen, and the nurses and doctors I knew, to go to another frightening place. I had never encountered nuns and when I was met by them in this hospital I was filled with renewed terror. I had been in a ward of four children, now I was with twenty. I had to get used to new faces and medical staff and to trust them all again to help me. This hospital was to rehabilitate me. I suffered long painful hours of exercises and physiotherapy. I was put in hoists and lowered kicking and screaming with terror into a pool; and, just as I had calmed down and had been exercised, I had to endure the return hoist out again.

My pal, Kathleen, arrived shortly after me in Coole, so we helped each other adjust to this new and frightening place. I went from having callipers and being in a wheelchair to taking my first steps unaided. I vividly remember my first attempt at walking. I tried to walk from my bed where I was clinging on, to the next one, which was close. I took a few steps and fell in a helpless heap on the floor. I kept trying and showed my mother my few tottering steps when she next visited. I had come to accept my situation by now, but I cried when anyone I knew left the hospital, wondering would that ever be me.

In June, 1959, I was discharged. I was still weak, but I could walk well. I tearfully said goodbye to Kathleen and more friends I made and returned to a now unfamiliar home. I had to readjust to my home and family. In all the time I was away I never saw any of my brothers and sisters, and I was now a very different little girl.

I later went to England in 1966, got married, and had a son and daughter. I returned to live in Ireland in 1988 when my marriage ended. I now experience the late effects of polio, but I am very thankful that I survived when so many didn't!

# Jim

I was admitted to the Polio Unit in Cherry Orchard Hospital in 1958. I was immediately put into an iron lung respirator - a long airtight, coffin-shaped box - with my head sticking out at one end, supported on a small ledge by a pillow. It was much more primitive than the one I use these days. I lay there listening to the motor pumping a large bellows which changed the air pressure inside. This created a partial vacuum to lift my ribcage to draw air into my lungs and then a positive pressure to partially compress my lungs, which helped me to breathe.

People often ask me, was I scared at the time, going into this box. Actually, I was too ill and in pain to be concerned, but the one thing that really worried me was when a nurse or a doctor wanted to open the iron lung. This frightened the life out of me as, in the beginning, I could not breathe at all once it was open. I remember having severe pain throughout my whole body, especially my arms and legs. Even severe pain can be coped with to some extent, but your next breath is very personal and something you cannot do without. Changing my pyjamas or the sheets was a nightmare. This was done by a team of nurses, who had everything prepared beforehand. They would work very quickly to do what was necessary, monitoring me carefully. Often it would take a number of sessions of opening the lung to get the task done.

After some weeks, one of the physiotherapists came along to start trying to get me breathing on my own. She had a stopwatch and got me to stay out of the lung a few seconds longer each day. This was quite terrifying as, in the beginning, I had great difficulty breathing for any length of time out of the lung. Some time later, when I had recovered my breathing a little, the physiotherapist would also come to do exercises and stretch my arms and legs, which was extremely painful and usually ended up in a crying and shouting session. I won't tell you, dear reader, who was crying and who was shouting! I cannot ever remember thinking to myself that I am paralysed. I think that the severity of my breathing difficulties completely blocked out any other concerns at that time.

Months later, when I could breathe better, I started getting out of the lung for short periods to sit in an armchair. I had recovered movement in my legs but had no movement in my arms, and an extremely weak back and neck. In time I started using a wheelchair which even then was an ancient relic. As I had no use of my arms, the only way I could move around was to pedal the spokes of the front wheels with my feet, or go backwards blindly, pushing on the floor with my feet. I got quite good at this, and the ward corridor could be a dangerous place when I was whizzing blindly along.

Life in Cherry Orchard at that time was quite hectic. The ward was extremely busy with at least three of the five big rooms being used by patients on respirators of various types, mainly iron lungs. There were regular admissions, discharges or transfers and, sadly, some deaths. It was certainly not dull for patients; there was always something happening. You were either getting some form of treatment, having a visit from the doctor, or getting changed, washed or fed.



*'Alligator' Iron Lung*

The hospital at that time was a training school for nurses, and there were many student nurses as young as 17 or 18 looking after us. On some occasions we used to have parties with entertainers visiting in the evenings, often staying into the early hours. There was always plenty of banter and I, a fifteen year old then, often imagined my innocence was under threat. I will let you imagine the teasing and trickery that went on.

I spent a year and a half in Cherry Orchard Hospital and was then transferred to England for specialist treatment, where I spent another year and a half in rehabilitation. Following my return to Ireland I attended the Central Remedial Clinic, firstly on a daily basis which was gradually reduced over a few years. During this time I joined the family drapery business where I spent the following 10 years. After this I dabbled in a number of businesses until in the early 1990s I retired due to ongoing respiratory ill-health. Since I got polio I have used a ventilator of some type daily, presently 14/16 hours mainly at night. I still use the iron lung in Cherry Orchard Hospital at least twice weekly, where I live part of the week, but also use modern portable ventilators, which allow me much more flexibility to live part-time at home, attend meetings, and travel abroad.

I have had exceptional care from many people over the years, mainly in Ireland but also in England and, in a medical sense, I owe my survival to them and to the tremendous support of family and friends. What makes all the difference in Cherry Orchard and places like it is the personal, caring dimension that people bring to their work, which sustains those like me far more than treatment or pills. For that, and the many friendships made, a sincere thank you to all concerned.

# *Bridie*

## Coming Home and Discovering my Mother

**I**t was February, 1954. My time had come to be released from hospital life. Soon it would be my eighth birthday. I had just spent the last four years of my childhood as a patient between two hospitals in Dublin – Cappagh Hospital in Finglas and St. Mary's Hospital in Baldoyle.

I was a victim of the polio epidemics that swept through the country during the forties, fifties and early sixties. I thought hospital was my home. The nurses and Sisters of Charity were my guardians and teachers. Having no previous memories of my earlier childhood, those precious years up to the age of four, growing within a family knowing both my parents and brothers and sisters, I didn't know I had another home.

I was just four years old when I contracted polio which affected my left arm. I was taken away from my home in Claremorris, Co Mayo by ambulance and hospitalised in Cappagh, Finglas in Dublin, a day I remember so well! My Dad travelled with me. When we got inside the hospital we were escorted into a very large sitting-room, or so it seemed to me. There were lots of toys and lovely dolls that distracted me straight away. I took hold of a doll and cuddled her with my right arm, the good one. This doll was going to be mine. You see, I had no power in my left arm; it was completely paralysed. The polio had attacked the muscle.

Money was scarce in Ireland in the fifties. I came from a small farm, which meant that my mother had to stay behind to take care of the milking of the cows and tend to the other animals. Both parents could not afford to make the journey. Women didn't travel much outside the home then, so it was Dad who made it alone to Dublin with me; and it was he who had to leave me behind. I'm sure it broke his heart and he was filled with grief and pain thinking to himself was he ever going to see me again, to have me home, or was I ever going to be okay again. I remember looking for him and being told by Sr. McCauley that he was gone, I cried and



*Bridie (right) with friend and Bridie's father, Baldoye Hospital, 1953.*

cried. Little did Dad know what the consequences would be. I felt so cheated. There was no 'goodbye'. I was handed over to the hospital for how long no one knew, but it turned out to be four years.

It was there I began my schooling. It was there I learned to read and write. It was there I made my First Holy Communion and learned Irish dancing. It was there I learned what discipline meant and that great high walls meant no escape. It was there I forgot about my other home, my mother and my family. It was there I lost contact with my roots.

There was great excitement in the hospital. The nurses were telling me I was going home. My clothes were packed, as next day I would be on my way to Mayo. My

Dad would be up to collect me. That day never left my memory. I looked around at those walls which seemed taller then. They looked like prison walls with no barbed wire, and in one corner there was a large green door with a latch and a strong bolt. I was told Dad would be coming in through that door. It was always locked and the bolt was well out of our reach. I had often looked at that door and wondered what lay beyond it.

I was to take my 'splint' home with me to support my left arm. I had got back about ten per cent of the power in it. I hated that piece of iron. The doctors were insisting that I was not to forget to wear it daily, and they would be telling Dad too when he arrived.

It was Tuesday. I was up early as Dad was due to arrive at midday. He would travel on the eight o'clock train from Claremorris and would arrive three and a half hours later at Kingsbridge Station (now called 'Heuston') in Dublin. I didn't know I was to be travelling by train and don't remember anything about the journey until we arrived at Claremorris Station. Sadly, I remember nothing of saying 'goodbye' to anybody at the hospital - only going through the big green door and it closing behind us - then no more.

It was a dark night when the train eventually dragged into the station. We disembarked onto the platform which was dimly lit. I remember being met by my Aunt Aggie and the driver of the old Ford Anglia black car, Paraic McHugh. My aunt held my right arm and escorted me to the car. There was a strong smell of burning coal from the steam train. I saw only one other car and a number of horse drawn carts. Men were loading the carts with large boxes of groceries to be delivered to the shops in town in time for the Fair Day.

I sat in the back seat with Aunt Aggie, and Dad sat in the front. The journey seemed long even though it was only six miles from the town of Claremorris. I remember us coming up the narrow sandy road through the village of Clooneen quite close to home as I looked out the back window. The night sky seemed to have so many stars. I didn't remember ever seeing a night sky before. As we passed the railway crossing at Mrs. Murphy's cottage, Paraic showed me the local national school, named Lehinch, and reminded me that I would be going to that school. It was quite near 'The Jennings House' (our home). Now we had only a few hundred yards to go!

The car stopped, Dad got out first and took out the bags. We walked in on the footpath, which was very rough, and there were no outside lights. Our house was known as a 'number seven design' and was built in the late thirties. The floors were all made from concrete. They felt strange. I did not remember that in Dublin. The floors there were wooden. To the right in the kitchen was a blazing fire with two large hobs, one on each side, and a black crane where swung a boiling kettle to tell us it was time for tea. This noise was strange. The fire was strange. The place was strange. I didn't know anybody, only my Dad. I was to be eight years old on 27th February and, having just lived eight years of my life, four of them in hospital, I was now relocated back into my family again

I didn't know what the words 'sisters' and 'brothers' meant. I had two sisters and three brothers and a mother. Opposite the fireplace stood an open dresser filled with dishes, large and small. It was painted cream. The tall kitchen walls were painted with yellow distemper, dark green oil paint underneath and a flowery border round the centre. We did have electricity. There was a woman standing by the dresser and my Aunt Aggie said to me, "Do you know who that is?" I said "No." She said, "That's your mother". That was a new word in my vocabulary. I remember staring at her and she was crying with happiness, but also with sadness. There was a division between us. Mam did come to visit me in hospital, but only a few times. They didn't have the money and it was very expensive for two people to travel from the West of Ireland to Dublin. Somebody had to stay at home, and it was always Mam. Seeing Dad several times a year carved out a different relationship between us. You see, any household where someone had contracted polio was to be avoided like tuberculosis. I learned from Mam shortly before she died what she went through during that period. She felt isolated, excluded and cried a lot. Whom did one turn to in those days? Nobody. Where did one get help? Nowhere. There was no support.

Mam had long hair tied in a bun. She wore a light brown hair-net. She was wearing a navy cross-over apron with pink flowers. She was forty-seven years old, and I was eight. She got the tea ready and we all sat round the table. This was the woman that was to rear me and give me so much love and care. I had now discovered my mother. She became such an inspiration in my life along with my grandmother.

# *Maureen*

**I** contracted polio in 1953 when I was 23 years old. At that time I was working as a clerk-typist in the Health Section of Cork County Council. I was actually diagnosed on Christmas Eve and moved by ambulance to the Fever Hospital, part of St. Finbarr's Hospital complex on the Douglas Road in Cork.

I had been ill with an infected heel and the doctor was attending me, so I was on bed rest when the paralysis struck. I can remember the restless night I spent with fever and aches and pains that heralded the polio. I have been told that if I had been leading my normal life, especially with all the pre-Christmas activity, the paralysis would have been much more serious.

One of my earliest memories is being put to bed in a 'barracks' of a ward with high ceilings and big windows. It was dark and I was the only one in the ward and completely paralysed from the waist down. When the House Surgeon had finished his examination, I can still see his face as he turned back to the door and wished me "Happy Christmas"!

It always amazes me how we humans adapt to circumstances as I settled in to the hospital routine. I had great devotion to Our Lady and was confident that she would help me cope and that I would get better. In the Fever Hospital visitors were not allowed. My home was very near the hospital which allowed my father to come every day and talk to me through the window. He also brought me a packet of sandwiches lovingly prepared by my mother.

I must have spent 6 to 8 weeks in the Fever Ward. There was a great nun in charge who had recently been on a course in the UK on polio care and she began to get me to sit up with my legs out of the bed. I also had physiotherapy sessions. I can remember the day my big toe on my right foot began to move.

I was in the Fever Ward on my own most of the time except for a very old lady who was admitted as an emergency and died in the bed next to me. I also remem-

ber the sad face of a little girl about 2 years old, gripping the side of her cot and crying bitterly.

As I got livelier I remember a voice from the Male Ward down the corridor shouting to me and me shouting back. At the AGM of the Post Polio Support Group in 2006 I met a man who was a 15 year old boy in that ward at that time!

When I moved to St. Catherine's Ward in the main hospital, all the patients were young women, many suffering from arthritis; and there was one girl with polio. There was a big fireplace in the ward with a table and chairs in front of the fire and those of us able to sit out of bed sat around it and chatted. There I began to get around on crutches. As I was fully grown I avoided the operations that so many polio survivors had to endure. I had one very good side that helped my balance.

My best memory of that time is walking on crutches out to the hospital chapel on the Feast of the Annunciation, 25th March and sitting there when my father came in - the surprise and joy on his face was wonderful to see.

I was discharged home using crutches. When I graduated to two sticks, I got back to work in August, 1954, and got on with the rest of my life.

# Joan

## Ode to polio parents

**I**f she survives she will always be disabled.”

To hear the above is probably a parent's worst nightmare. It causes the heart to sink and sends the mind into a spin, particularly when the illness is caused by the attack of a bug or virus of some sort, as it was in my case.

Where did it come from? Did we not keep everything clean? In an old country house where rats and mice might be about, did one get in unnoticed and contaminate our food? It was not known, at that time, where Infantile Paralysis or Polio, as it was later called, came from or how it was transmitted. In the end it mattered little for the damage was done and there was no getting away from it. My parents immediately sought the best assistance that could be found for me. There was a new tablet on the market at the time called M & B, and they arranged for me to have it. I am not sure what it did or was supposed to do, but it was considered the best option at the time and I took it.

I was in bed in semi-darkness as the blind was drawn to keep too much light out. It was during the Second World War and, as there was no petrol for private motorcars, the only mode of transport was a bicycle or a horse-drawn vehicle. My father rode his bicycle about 15 miles to tell our nearest relatives what had happened. When he arrived he told them about my illness and would not wait, even for a cup of tea, but set out immediately and cycled 15 miles back, so as not to leave my mother worrying alone for too long.

When I had to go to hospital my mother prepared me for the experience. As she got my clothes ready she came in and out of my room telling me what she was putting in the case for me, to try to soften the blow that I was leaving them. To be quite honest it meant little to me, either because I was too sick or because 'going away to hospital' meant nothing to a four year old. The hospital was in Dublin about 50

miles from home, so they knew that visiting on a regular basis was not possible. Anyway, I think there was a policy at the hospital of visiting only being allowed about twice a week. I know that all of us children knew when it was visiting day and all our eyes were trained on the ward door to see if a visitor would arrive to see us. For some there, nobody ever did. My parents arranged for a relative to see me about every second week and my mother came by train whenever she could. My father did not come as someone had to stay to do the farm work and care for the other three children. More about that later.

I got the best treatment that was available at that time; I was put in splints, got heat treatment and exercises in water. I remember the first time I was propped up in my splints standing up against the end of my bed; I thought I was very tall. On my fifth birthday my mother arrived with a birthday cake. It was a sponge with icing on top but as I was completely paralysed and lying flat I could only see the sides of it and they were not iced. Then the cake was shared with the nurses; and I was not pleased as, probably because of the treatments they carried out that hurt, I counted them as enemies. What a terrible waste!

Although receiving the best medical treatment and making some progress, my general health deteriorated. I got so thin, one could say emaciated, that my mother did not at first recognise me on one occasion when she visited. This may have been the result of poor food at a time of war: it was the time of the 'black bread', as older people describe it, or because I had a swallowing problem and was a slow eater. Nurses and their aides were busy people. My mother brought some eggs from the farm to be given to me, but I can only remember getting one which was so hard boiled that my hand was not strong enough to get the shell off.

My parents approached the doctors about taking me out of hospital and they were not happy. They were told: "If you take her home she will never walk." "If we leave her there, will she survive?" wondered my parents. It was a risk and a very big decision, but they made it. My mother was instructed on how to give me treatment and I went home. She was determined to prove the doctors wrong; I would walk!

I can remember the day I left hospital. My father came to carry me and, as my mother was getting my clothes, he came into the ward and spoke to me. It was obvious I did not know him; in fact I thought he was a new doctor. My mother then came on the scene and asked, "Do you not know who that is?" I put two and two together, as I knew he was to come to take me home that day. I said, "It's Daddy." I then

put my head under the blanket for I knew it was a terrible thing not to know my own father.

A big child in splints, arriving home had quite an effect on the whole family. It was like the arrival of a new baby; everything changed as I required a lot of attention. I had to be carried up and down the stairs and, while I was not heavy, my splints were. My mother strained her back doing it. There were more jobs to be done in the house; others had to get things for me that I could not get myself. I was spoiled. My general health improved as plenty of milk, chicken and rabbit soup, all found locally, built up my strength. My mother got help in the house as she could not manage everything.

While my grandfather gave my father the farm, he gave him little else. When my parents married there was a lot of work to be done to the house. However, they were far-sighted and made sensible plans for it. There was no running water at the time, but there was a well; and they planned to pipe water into the house. So when renovating it they prepared a bathroom, installing all necessary plumbing for when they tapped the well. They had not got that far when I became ill. The doctors said I must have exercise in water. So my mother carried buckets of water up the stairs, heated it, and put it into the bath for me to exercise in it. I do not know how she or anyone else managed.

Financially there was no assistance from the State, since a farmer's income took into account the value of his land. It was the time of 'compulsory tillage' and every farmer was compelled to till a certain amount of land for grain, so that the country could be self sufficient. It meant working day and sometimes night to keep up the quota. A taxi had to be hired when I attended doctors in Dublin, because of the war. Special aids and appliances had to be purchased; there was no end to extra expenses.

Gradually I got better and better, every physical achievement was applauded. I learned to walk, to ride a bicycle and a pony, although the pony riding ceased one day when I got severely injured - my decision! By the age of nine I was able to attend national school, but to get me there was a problem. The war was then over and petrol was available again, so my mother learned to drive a car to take me to school. She did not find this easy at all.

At my physical peak I lived a fairly normal life, but I had a bad limp. So one might say that I was launched into life; but where would I have been without the parents and family that supported me all the way through?

# *Words to the Virus Which Found Me in 1942*

How did you find me?  
How in the name of God did you find me?  
A tiny infant .... down in the heart of old  
Malahide village  
....in the little house beside the coal yard.  
Were you looking for me or what?  
Jesus – I was only just born.  
I knew nothing at all.  
The name they put on you was bigger than me.  
Infantile Paralysis.  
That is what they called you.  
You went around the place paralysing babies.  
And you found me down there in that beautiful  
place beside the village green  
looking over the island  
looking out to the sea.  
You came into me and you made me cry.  
What time did you come in?  
What day was it because I don't know?  
What brought you down that way in 1942?  
Which way did you come?  
Was it down New Street past Bertie Boyle's?  
or did you come round from the Back Strand  
under the railway arch past Lesley Riley's?  
Was the tide full in?

I don't know that either.  
Why did you go past Annie Daniel's house  
and come into ours?  
There was me and Michael, Ma and Da.  
Why did you come into me?  
Did I make a sound as you were going past?  
Was that the way it happened?  
Was the wireless on?  
What could you hear?  
I think it was a cowardly thing that you did.  
To take the life away from my arm  
and put a hidden slow wasting in my legs  
was a cowardly thing indeed.  
Fifty years on  
I am still finding the damage of you.  
Fifty years on  
you find new tears in me.

Are you still alive?  
Are you still doing your virus stuff?  
Are you still alive  
or did something wipe you out?  
I would like to know your name?  
Mine is Pat.  
I played soccer in spite of you  
and I was good.

*By Pat Ingoldsby*



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