

Beef Every Day But No Latin

The Story of James Bernard Clifton and Claremont - The School Set Up By A Schoolboy

As told to Kevin Newman

To Patrick Fergus Brendan Newman – another, slightly later Irish addition to Brighton and Hove who also brought much to the city.

Lesson 1 – Physics and Mathematics (propulsion, trajectories, angles and velocity)

Living by the sea does strange things to a person, and even stranger to a boy.

There is something that can induce madness when one is surrounded around at least half of your being by somewhere wet, increasingly deep, dark and dangerous. The reduction of half of your travel options means one cannot always move where you physically want to and so the journeying you need becomes journeying of the mind. Books in other words. I have heard it said that everyone has one book that will change their lives and take them somewhere. In my case, James Bernard McCarthy Clifton, (that's Bernard to you, or Clifton as I was known back then), I'd have to agree that is true. I had a book once that took me down a very unusual road.

It wasn't, however a book I read.

It was one that was thrown at me.

Thrown at my head to be precise. If you want to know that sort of detail. A copy of the snappily-titled *Advanced arithmetic and elementary algebra and mensuration, a text-book for secondary schools and students preparing for public examinations* was thrown across the classroom on a sunny May day in 1925. It was lobbed by my then crippled schoolmaster; the one-and-only Irish rogue, tippler (and lobber of books at schoolboys in a rare-old dilly-dreamworld), Mr Michael O'Byrne. Mick, or MOB, as he was known for short, looked like your typical schoolmaster of that time. He was tall, broad-shouldered with sometimes tamed wild and wandering hair and a tailfin moustache. He

was usually a lousy shot, due to his vision sometimes being a bit shaky from his time in the trenches, his penchant for Guinness before morning choir practice but most of all this keen cricketer was a lousy shot as he didn't really want to make the book engage with your head (except in an educational sense). He normally hurled a copy of *Hardy* at you so that it would land with a ruddy-great 'Whumph!' on your desk and 'scare the bejesus out of you', as he liked to put it.

But that wasn't to be the case this time. Either the Black Stuff (Guinness) or the Brown Stuff (whiskey) had gone down too easily (more than likely) that day, but the great big bulk of a book, 394-pages worth of the dullest tasks known to man or beast on God's good Earth, resplendent in a bulky hardback cover whacked me sideways on the head as I was looking down onto Holland Road out of the window. One moment I was watching the good folk of Hove go about their daily business, with an air of purpose that Sussex folk seem to hold, and the next thing I knew my brain had been sent an almighty wallop across my cranium, my skull seemed to throb and my teeth had made what seemed like their own separate journey across my mouth. The bottom of my jaw, I remember moved at a different pace from the top half and a gurgling "warragahh!" sound resonated from my throat.

"Clifton!" shouted MOB. "Yer great pappy-headed mutton chop! What on earth are you dreaming about?"

And that, dearest reader, was this writer initially thought that I had been thinking about nothing at all, absolutely damn-all. Not home, not about mother; certainly not about father (which was rare), nor friends or even the good denizens of the town of Hove whom I had been staring at.

"Yer should be concentrating on yer studies, Clifton. This is no time to be lookin' at the women, so it isn't. Leave all that love and lust and thoughts of the women until you've a beard and nuts that reach the floor."

At this point, I should point out that MOB wasn't your usual schoolmaster. Despite his well-to-do background from a middling Irish family in Leighlinbridge, County Carlow, no delicacies of thought or expression were needed in his view. Nor, according to him, should young gentlemen be excused the

odd fist or the language of the dockyard, the public bar or the factory. Rationing of the course, the guttural, the offensive and the malodorous phrase or word were seldom required, except when the Headmaster, Mr Chubb slid into view (yes, that really was his name). MOB would insult, tease, insinuate and pester the living daylight out of you and tell you how much he detested you and 'every other frisky eleven-year-old' in that class. We weren't all actually eleven, but that hadn't seemed to have sunk in with MOB. To him, everyone was eleven years old and 'vermin', 'effluent', 'toe rags' and, usually by Friday, 'unwholesome scum'.

And we loved him for it. For even with his slight reek of Guinness farts and tobacco, the odd punch, his inability to remember your name by the afternoon, and to refer to each of us boys as 'You there!', for his ill-fitting gowns and failure to shave around his pronounced Adam's apple, there was something the other masters didn't have. Especially the insipid and aptly named Headmaster, Mr Clovis Chubb, who needed the help of his mother to run Holland Road School.

WOB was a war hero, who in a previous life as Lieutenant M O'Byrne of the London Regiment had taken a German bullet in his knee at Third Ypres in 1917, as he frequently told us. Despite mood swings, as a result of the pain he still suffered, he had a genuine warmth and sparkiness about him. He seemed in his own way to care for us; who we were, where we were going and who we were going to be one day. He might clip us around the heads (what teacher at that time didn't? This was a generation who had seen a millennium's worth of violence in a handful of years), but he would also rip out the fly leaves from books on which he would draw intricate pictures on to give as prizes. He would make models for us of First World War aircraft and explain their workings. He was a fascinating mix of violence and gentleness and when Chubb was out we enjoyed his secret missions where he would send the fastest runners on to his 'Grog shop' in Church Street to purchase his copious amounts of cigarettes. His love of cricket pervaded into every maths lesson and we were tricked into learning algebra, trigonometry, calculus and the dullest of dull equations by discussing the latest cricket match at the nearby County Cricket ground, which was also in Hove. Holland House School had a deal with the Cricket Ground in neighbouring Palmeira Avenue, so we could use its

grounds when Sussex weren't at play. This would come in handy for my school later on, after my breakaway from the Republic of Chubb and Mumsy Chubb. And yes, I do mean *my* school. I started a school up.

Events such as the looming General Strike, the chaos in Germany two years prior, politics, culture, arts, history and literature all came alive in his world of MOB. His engineering background before the war also meant he could apply the dullest bit of maths to a practical application. Of course, it was still a Mathematics lesson, but to Michael O'Byrne there were no boundaries, no limits to what your ambitions should be and on that wet Wednesday back in 1925, no reason why I should be staring out of the window. The cricket wasn't on or visible from there. So he chucked a book at me. Fair play.

The class laughed, especially as the shot had been such a prime one and the attached comments about my burgeoning libido and its aim at the good women at Hove scored a straight six. But then MOB's question hit me.

What had I been thinking about?

There must have been something going on in my Puny Mental Muscle for thought, or my PMM as I called my brain. And then it struck me. I *had* been thinking. I'd been contemplating what it would be like if *I* ran the school, and not Chubb. 'That great Mammy's Boy' we'd heard MOB call the Headmaster when he thought we weren't listening. For Chubb had assembled the most inept collection of practitioners of pedagogy ever possible that a boy's family could pay for. Apart from the Jewish science teacher Pearl, only MOB had anything going for him. As for our Latin master, I won't even begin to regale you with how one teacher could make a dead language want you to join it. Admittedly, in the decade after the Great War, masters were thin on the ground, along with menfolk as a whole, and many of the men who hadn't been left behind in the Flanders mud or the sand of the Dardanelles had left their mental faculties back there in the theatre of combat. If you had a pulse and could vaguely face the right way the teaching profession beckoned. Still, Chubb's men were a rum old bunch and I had been thinking, why don't those who schools are for – children, in other

words, in case you're wondering, why don't *they* get to run them? Why is the responsibility for moulding of minds left to those whose minds are the mouldiest?

In my life I've achieved a lot since that wet Wednesday. I've designed motion picture cameras, a bomb blast pressure recorder, and a mine detector to name just a few. That thought back in May 1925 that MOB had whacked into my brain didn't manage to go away though, and the result was that I indeed set up my own school, even as a mere 'frisky 11-year old'. I too, as I said, became a Clovis Chubb of sorts (but without the Mother thankfully looming large) and that school? Well, it's still going today despite the war since you're asking (and I'm sure you were). In fact, that's where I'm heading now, despite being in the fullest reaches of adulthood, but first I need to pay MOB a visit too and see what he makes of this latest war. Amongst other things. If you want to join me and find out how it all came about, you're more than welcome. I will warn you though, we will encounter one-legged Hollywood heartthrobs, savage mutts, a steely Matron and I'll need to tell you all this hopefully without Hitler's Luftwaffe dropping bombs on us. There will also be generous amounts of beef. Thick, sinewy, gelatinous and tough chunks of the rotting carcasses of dead animals, which some people enjoy stuffing down their gullets. If that doesn't sound too arduous, then do, by all means, tag along. Even in a busy town like Hove, with people all around, one can still be glad of the company. Life can be lonely at times, so join me do. Speaking of Hove, I'd better tell you something of this place that dominated my formative years. Rather than back in September 1940 or even my early days in 1925 though, I'd better take you back before the Norman conquest.