Tales of The Great

THE GREAT UNWASHED depends on daytime custom to survive. Big-spending youths on stag or hen nights are few and far between, and the clientele holds no benevolent lottery-winners or locals-made-good. The folk who pay the bills are the old ones who use the pub as a second home.

For the most part the regulars are men, and for the most part they are poor. But they move in numbers, and between them are capable of consuming impressive amounts of drink.

There is a myth which holds that the aged are privy to some little-known wisdom. The nostalgic and naive can sometimes be seen plying the old-timers with drink in the hope that this may part them from some pearly advice. It is never forthcoming, or else takes the form of such banalities as could be read in any daily paper's horoscope. We once had a student from one of the city's leafier suburbs who came in with a tape-recorder and a note-pad. He claimed to be a social anthropology student, and was collecting oral history for his project. He pestered one and all for a full afternoon, bought drink for anyone who could tell him a story, but made the mistake of asking Sippy Pat for her recollections of the war. Pat wasn't born until the mid-fifties, so was none too pleased. She quietly hailed her cousin who, with a couple of friends, escorted the tiddly historian to the lane by the car-park where any remaining curiosity was kicked out of him.

Of course the old ones do have their stories, but they keep them close and quiet. What stories they have that would interest others don't always involve the teller as hero, and so many of the best come from others, second and third hand.

I can tell you about Sammy the Biter, who was well into his sixties when he decided that he wanted to be taller than the five foot two nature had allowed him. He purchased, by mail-order, a special pair of shoes which would make him three inches taller. I recall the dreich Autumn day when he came in, soaked and shifty, and much taller than he should be.

–What's happened to you Sammy? I asked, and he put a forefinger to lip and leaned closer.

–It's the special shoes. It's a miracle. Just like it said in the ad so it is, three inches on you and no-one will notice anything untowards at all.

The astonishment on the faces of those seated proved that the improvement had been noted, and had inspired a stunned silence.

–How can they not notice Sammy? I whispered, you're too tall now.

Sammy made for the toilet in slow, careful steps. The shoes, for everyone was now looking at them, seemed unusually short, almost square, and the movement of Sammy's legs suggested he was walking on tippy-toes, causing terrible distortion of his upper legs and hips. It occurred to me that perhaps he had become a devil, and the black shinies contained not feet, but cloven horntrotters. Sammy emerged from the toilet, went sadly home, and the shoes have never been seen since.

John the Midden has a good stock of fighting tales, but in all he is cast as the victor. They are mostly true it seems, but he omits his few losses which are of far more interest to those of us who are less than enamored with the big fellow. His ignominious hammering at the hands of tiny Finny MacAteer and Pakky, at the end of which he was taken under police escort to the hospital with a big aubergine stuck in his throat, is the stuff of local legend. But that's another one altogether.

Personally, I don't care to listen to too much talk from the old ones. I find that few can be honest about their own failings and mistakes, are too ready to blame spouses or offspring for their own weaknesses, and there is a sizable minority who have no stories at all, but are simply reaching the end of their span as they lived it, in total boredom, only slower than before.

But there was one whose story stuck with me, and has for thirty years or more.

Guilt keeps the memory of Poppy Laggan alive. My guilt. He had been a regular as long as Da could remember at the time I met him. I was still young then, and with my own team of children just a couple of decades behind me, I was full of life and wanted more. I absorbed stories and characters, sure that the remainder of my span would be taken up with visiting fantastic places when I'd made my fortune, telling my sons and daughters about all the world-wide wonders awaiting them, becoming then a grandfather, a contented slipper-bound sage smoking exotic tobaccos and surrounded by enigmatic souvenirs.

Poppy Laggan was not remarkable to look at. Fifty-something, prematurely gray like all his four older brothers, much smaller than the others. The runt I suppose. He would come in on the way back from his job at the printing works, have two pints of stout and a glass of red-eye, then head home for his dinner. Very occasionally he would come in of a Saturday evening with his brother Sean, but even then he would hold his silence, content to let the older man speak. Poppy was seldom obvious in his drunkenness, could hold his own with the others. He never gambled, and had an almost phobic aversion to horses and any talk of them. But he was well-liked by all.

It was a Thursday night when he came in at his appointed time, and he gave no indication that anything was amiss. I hadn't noticed he was wearing a collared white shirt, and it was only when he removed the black tie from beneath the scarf that I realised he must have been to a funeral. I didn't dare to enquire, and left him in peace. The radio was on that night, and the place was busy, listening to some European

Ian Brotherhood

Unwashed

game whose participants and outcome have escaped me.

When we closed, Da moved to the end of the bar and sat with Poppy. They didn't say much, but I could tell something was up. I cleared out the cellar and settled the cash, settled the optics and poured them another. They had moved to the snug below the gas mantle. Da beckoned me over.

Poppy was worse than I'd ever seen him, but for all he poured in the drink it seemed not to worsen his state. His eyes, red and tired, would close for several seconds, then he would shake himself awake, drink more, and mumble something to Da. I could see Da was more than worried - he was frightened. I got more drinks. And more. And Poppy's story slowly came out.

Sean had died. Heart attack. The first one, and a big one, it had finished him at fifty-eight. Poppy had been the closest to him.

–See, thing is, I know what's happening now, said Poppy, and Da nodded and I watched.

–It's alright, said Da.

–Ma told me from early I had a gift, that I had the sight and all that. It's like being locked in the picture-house, not knowing what's coming on. I can't stop it. Closing my eyes makes it clearer, opening them just makes it fade.

I thought I caught a movement, Da making a tiny sign of the cross with his forefinger.

–How's the difference 'tween a curse and a gift, carried on Poppy, when you get to see them things no-one should see? Sean's back again now. I don't know if it's behind or ahead, and that's no matter. I don't even know where. But he's back in it again when he thought he must've been out. He was happy being out, I know that much.

Poppy drank deep and long again, eyes closed. Da lit their cigarettes.

–There's a to-do before he's born, a ceremony on the shoreline. It's a clear sky and cold as hell, and the stars have something to do with it. It's the women in charge, the men are settled about the fire and they bring him in with the music and animals on leads, kids dancing about. What a terrible smell of fish all about there is. It's happy, and he's lifted up and there's a cheering, then silence. They look like us these folk, just the same. But it's not his Ma that's holding him. She's dead. A figure comes out from the dunes, all covered with hairy things and not a face on it you can see, and it's chanting over and over and the cheering gets back up and there's an almighty party. He soon knows he's special. Other weans get taken out on the boats to fish, or else help their mammies about the house. There's always work to be done. But not for Sean. Not that that's his name now you understand. I can't say his name. I can hear it, but it makes no sense. But it means The Deer or The Stag or something like that. It's a special name. He does as he pleases. If he wants to eat when the others are working, he eats. If he chooses to sleep all day, so be it. There is never an angry word against him, no child dares near him. Angry dogs get their tails between their legs when they smell him coming. He has a fight with a simple lad from a nearby village. Maybe they're about ten or eleven. The bigger lad gives him a fair old thumping and Sean goes back to his village with bruises and burst lips. There's a real to-do over it. The women all get together and stroke his hair and make him lie down and give him special mixtures and foul drinks, even though he's fine and just wants to get back out and about. The men come in that evening and there are angry shouts. Next day, before the sun, the men leave with weapons clanging, and return before mid-day with the head of the boy impaled on a lance. It is taken to the shore. There is another ritual, quiet and serious. The head is left atop the lance, and even when the birds have stripped it clean it stays. Sean has his own house, deep-set in the low flat stone, and everything he needs. Every woman in the village is his mother and sister, every man his father and brother. But he has no family. Everyone is his friend but he never has a visitor at his comfortable home. He takes to wandering further and further from the village, climbing the cliffs, hunting alone for the men will not allow him to join them on land or sea, and he meets travellers who are happy to talk until they find out who he is. He has no sense of being famous or fearsome, but it seems that he is. He grows tall and broad. The girls start to gather within view of his home. He is in the angry years, and takes it out on his own. He fights with anyone, daring them to fight properly, though he knows they will always go down eventually. He takes a girl back one night, and the following day there is a lot of talk but nothing done. Her parents smile and allow her to bring him some food. He takes another girl, and another. No harm comes to him. The men let him come out on the boats, the great low long boats, and he retches and heaves for days on end. He feels like life has started for him with this voyaging, albeit little more than bartering trips across the bay. And then it all comes so fast. I don't know how old he is, but not much over twenty. A rider comes and talks to the village men and right away you can see there's something up. The women start crying, the children start running about, fighting each other. They're going to war it seems. Sean's watching from his house. He feels fear now. First time. Real fear. A great ship arrives the next day, and together with their own smaller ship they prepare. Food salted, kegs of beer, weapons greased and wrapped against the brine, furs piled high in the wide base of the ship. They leave at daybreak. The women and children watch from the shore as the ships move away and head South. Some of the older children run alongside the clifftops and wave and watch and wave until they cannot be seen. The voyage is unlike anything Sean could have imagined. He had heard the men talk of high seas and monsters, but nothing had prepared him for such terror. He cannot eat, cannot sleep. He alone takes no shift at the oars. After weeks, they beach at midnight on moonlit sand. The land they have found is low and quiet, and not a tree to be seen. The sea washes calm, carries a warm wind from the West. Sean in half-sleep, the men discuss the attack. The chiefs debate long into the night, consulting hide-etched maps. Tonight is their last before the assault. The last of the beer is consumed, the beef soaked and eaten. The priests of all the villages represented come together and invoke whoever's favour. The music is muted and serious, but grows stronger and faster as the night goes on. With the light at its weakest, for it never really gets dark now in the Summer, the priests become frenzied. Sean joins the others in the dance about the fire but he is roughly subdued, made to spectate from the centre. Then the dance stops. The prayers continue as the men fall upon him, and they pull at his hair and face, two men to each limb, they rip him apart. His being alive seems to be important. He screams. But with no mouth and no tongue there is no sound. He can see tears in the eyes of some, but others are laughing and frothing. Leathered fingers pop his eyeballs, and he hears the excitement mount as one of the priests takes a small knife to Sean's belly and slices space enough to get a hand in. Out with his guts and heart, but it's something else they want. Maybe his liver. Whatever, the warm meat is pulled from him, hacked off and raised. Sean listens, dying. The meat is squeezed, its juice added to the bucket which the men will drain as their last and most important protection. Sean dies again, and the last faces in his mind's eye are those of the only folk he'd ever known and loved, berserk with fear and rage.

It's not for me to say if Poppy was simply drunk and gibbering. It doesn't matter if his story was true or not, and no-one can ever say it was or wasn't, except maybe Sean. What matters is that I, in my excitement and stupidity, repeated the story to the others the next day. Poppy is a seer, I told them. He has the gift, I said. Da cracked up when he heard I'd been talking, but it was too late.

Poppy was forced to wander even further afield in search of a pub where he would not be pestered for racing forecasts and bombarded with selfish medical enquiries. People would go to his door at all times of the day and night, and there was even talk of some film crew wanting to make a documentary with him in it. He eventually moved away, and none of us even know if he's still alive.

Sometimes I wonder if he sees his own next life, or had seen mine, and then try to imagine what he may have seen. And then I see my own life for myself, and wonder what that means at all. Not as exciting as Sean The Stag's, that's for sure. Then I look about here of a daytime, at the shaky old crumblers who pay my bills and my wages, and I wonder whether I'd rather my guts torn from me at the peak of an adventure, or be left to fossilise in peace. And I truly don't know.