Flying High: Memoirs of Major Robert Stewart

One

Child of a Revolution: Early Memories

While no one has the privilege of choosing what time they enter the world, Robert Stewart couldn’t have left his Mother’s womb at a more inopportune time. On the 20th September 1918 my Father was imprisoned in Belfast jail for republican activities, the “hundred days offensive” was raging on in the battle-fields of Europe, and the family businesses - a hardware store and builders’ providers in Waterford city– was battling volatile markets and the constant threat of bankruptcy.

To make matters worse, my Mother, despite being heavily pregnant, was managing the businesses in my father’s absence, which necessitated travelling the un-tarred, boggy roads between Tramore and Waterford twice daily - if only the youth of today, accustomed to smoothly macadamed motorways, could only see the boggy boithrins that passed for roads in them days! It was during this chaotic time that I came into the world.

Having been born in Tramore in 1918, my story should perhaps start there, but, unfortunately, my memory does not go back that far. With regard to early infancy, growing up in Waterford city, I am better served by memory.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, scenes from war and conflict dominate my early memories. The Duke of Waterford hotel, which was situated adjacent to our house, was commandeered by British Army officers during the “War of Independence”, and I can remember barbed wire demarcating the entrance. Years later, I remember my Mother recollecting how the family had employed a rather pretty nursemaid to look after me. According to legend, whenever she took me out on one our daily outings, she would try to avoid the military personnel that would be stationed outside the hotel, as she was apparently quite popular with the loitering soldiers. She would allegedly grab me up and run off until there was a respectable distance between us and them. A wise precaution it must be said, as she was likely to have her lovely hair shorn by the IRA if she was caught fraternising with British soldiers.

The War of Independence was soon superseded by the Irish Civil War, and that was to herald more turmoil and upheaval. Our house in Waterford was appropriated by the National Army in 1922, so the family moved to Tramore, taking up temporary residence in the isolated, and slightly ramshackle, “Cheevers Lodge”. I will never forget the stormy nights in that lodge, particularly the darkness of the house, we being bereft of the electric lighting we had become accustomed to in Waterford. I can recall, with particular trepidation, what happened when someone called to that house during one of the nights the lodge was being pounded by the Atlantic winds. As soon as someone opened the front door a burst of wind would blow out the lamps and candles and cause pandemonium until, in the pitch darkness, Dad or Mum would scavenge some matches and relight the candles.

The lodge did have piped water but no hot water, so, every Saturday night, a galvanised bath (where clothes were also laundered by hand) was laid on the kitchen floor near the range. Splayed across the range was a formidable array of utensils for heating water - kettles, pans and an urn with a tap. When the water was heated it was poured into the bath, with cold water added to adjust the temperature. I was then undressed before the range and, at this stage of my life, not in the least bit troubled by being naked in front of the staff.