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EDITOR’S NOTE

Interviewed by Franck Kersnowski, August 15, 1991, First published in JSSE n°21, 1993

1 Ben Kiely grew up in County Tyrone, one of the northern counties of Ireland then, as now, occupied by the British Army. Though his ties to the North remain strong, he found his way to the cosmopolitan life of Dublin as a Jesuit novice and then discovered his true calling as a storyteller. That he has lectured, written criticism, and worked as a journalist never interfered with the writer of fiction; everything he wrote was a narrative, from Land Without Stars: A Novel (1946) to Drink To The Bird (1992), the first volume of his memoirs. That he is recognized as Ireland’s finest storyteller speaks to the efficacy of his career and the sureness of his genius.

2 Ben Kiely is of the Ireland of the Republic, a new country with an ancient literature. With the poet Patrick Kavanagh, Brian O’Nolan (aka Flann O’Brien) a writer of fiction and newspaper columns, and the gunman and writer Brendan Behan, Kiely came of age as a writer. Their generation followed the triumphs of Yeats and Joyce. Like Joyce, the writers of this generation were Catholics who remembered the old stories and sagas, but lived in a world rapidly becoming urban. Yet they never lost their memories of the internecine life of the clan. Read as a chronicle of the very democratic literary world of Dublin from the forties on, the writings of Ben Kiely are invaluable. As did Joyce, he lived in a world of literary people and chancers, great souls and bog men who “would use their feet on you”. Read as fiction, Ben's writings bring the smell of the country and the smell of the pub into delicate proximity. Though he is drawn back to his native Tyrone, Ben is a Dubliner, honored in his city and in his local pub, the Donnybrook Madigan’s. Ben Kiely never neglects his two homes and never fails to remind his readers that human courage and character must outweigh the demands of politics if great stories and great storytellers are to continue and if their readers are to understand the significance of their own humanity.
This interview began in 1984 when Ben and I sat down with a pot of tea and a tape recorder two mornings before I was to leave Dublin. We talked about the collection *A Ball of Malt and Madame Butterny, A Dozen Stories* (1973). That interview caused me to want to do this one: a general interview. Again with a pot of tea (and smoked salmon on soda bread) and a tape recorder, Ben and I sat down on August 15, 1991. Exchanges of letters concerning spellings and reference came to an end in October of 1992. And this was printed in August of 1993.

Frank KERSNOWSKI.: What was the first piece you published?

Ben KIELY: Oh, the first piece I published. That’s a bit ridiculous. I was in high school (as you’d say) with some friends. One of them is still living. He was here the other day. Leo Loughran, a very famous character from the North, Cookstown; there’s a lot of history in that man. The other were Frank Fox and Thomas Tummin. It was a great joke: Lawrence Leo Loughran, L cubed; Frank Fox, F squared. He’s dead, was a lovely man. TT, T squared. And while we were secondary school, Tom got peritonitis and died. We went off to his funeral at Tempo, County Fermanagh. An old country parish priest preached a sermon over this young boy. Loughran and Fox were satisfied with the sermon, so when we got back to Omagh town, then said you’ll do a write-up (I being the writer of the group) of the funeral. So I wrote up the funeral and put in a flowery passage that the poor priest never preached at all. It appeared in *The Ulster Herald* and *The Fermanagh Herald*. And I was often wondering, did the poor man read it, you know, wondering if he’d gone mad in the head. There was something in it about the *guerdon* of eternal life, which misprinted as *guerdon*, which is a very good word too. It was my first experience with being printed. And I remember thinking of Thackery’s *Bacon and Bungay* and bumfy, wee literary boy, etc. I went to looking for Mr. Anthony Mulvey, M.P., editor of *The Ulster Herald*, *The Fermanagh Herald*, the Nationalist newspapers. I was told: “Mr Mulvey isn’t here. He’s down at Mr. Parks,” who was editor of *The Tyrone Constitution*, the Unionist paper. So I went down and found Parks and Mulvey (dear friends and political opponents) having tea and drank tea with them and presented my copy. That was the first thing of mine that was ever printed. I can’t even remember what after that. I think it might have been in Father Senan’s time as publisher. I must show you a gallery of pictures I have from Senan’s time. This is one of the many periodicals he produced. He was a very extraordinary man; he died out in Australia in ’84. I have one of the last letters he wrote to a human being. I was in Oregon, and he was in Australia when he wrote. But I was in hospital at the time of my first contact with Senan, about 1939. At that time, I wrote to *The Weekly Standard* about partition. I remember that was printed. Afterwards, I worked for *The Standard* under Peter O’ Curry . But I sent stuff in to Father Senan, and he printed it. In fact, one of them was, “Good God,” a long poem in blank verse about 1916, about which the less said the better. But Pearse Hutchinson liked it actually.

F.K.: Pearse is a good poet.

B.K.: Yes, Pearse is a good poet. And then when I came out of hospital, I was living up North. I wearing a back splint. I called in to see Senan. He’d been in to see me in hospital. He said: Can you cycle? I said: Of course, I can cycle; I’m only wearing a back splint. The only men I ever met who wore back splints were John Kennedy, the President, and Mr. Cadwalleder, the harbour master of Holyhead, a great friend of mine. I met Kennedy at the New Ross party when he was over here. I was on *The Irish Press* at the time. Senan said: Take some time and cycle across Tyrone and write an
article on Tyrone. So I took my bicycle and took the train up to Dungannon; and I cycled to the Lough Shore and then cycled right across County Tyrone and wrote an article about that. I think that was the first longish piece I ever printed. I called it “Long After O'Neill,” pinching the title from Michael J. Murphy who had written for The Bell a very good piece called “Long After Carleton.” That would have been sometime about 1940.

I’ve got a copy of it somewhere still because Larry Loughran appears in it. He was teaching school at the time near Cookstown, and he introduced me to one of the last of the Tyrone native speakers. There were about fifteen old people still speaking native Irish up on Glen Lark, where Hugh O'Neill trained his pikemen. It’s a very curious instance. He spoke Irish; his wife and daughters understood Irish but didn’t speak it. The daughters, there were four of them, could sit on a long bench and sing macaronic songs, a line in Irish and a line in English. It was a curious example of the way a language dies, you know. They spoke the beautiful, Tyrone Irish. It’s very similar to the Donegal Irish, except for a slight difference in vowels.

F.K.: What was the first piece of fiction you published?

B.K.: The first piece of fiction, oh dear. I think it might have been in one of Senan's periodicals, too. It was, I think. As a matter of fact I did a little radio piece about this. I decided I would write me a novel. There was a park near Omagh called the Lovers' Retreat. It was a beautiful place you know on the Camowen River, a sort of mountain stream ran along. So some decent city father christened it the Lovers' Retreat. To soldiers in the army it was known as the Bucker's Den, actually. It was a garrison town.

But I met this young soldier in the place. I got friendly with him. I was walking along the town one day when I met the young fellow between two policemen. He had deserted from the army and made a run for the border at Strabane. But in the process, he had lifted a few things that didn't belong to him like a bicycle, a suit of civilian clothes and so on. So he was caught by the coppers. In those days, you could stop them. I knew one of them and said: “What’s all this about, between us all.” So I heard the tale then. He seemed quite cheery, and off he went with the two policemen. I never saw him again.

But I decided I would write a novel called King's Shilling about the runaway soldier. What I wanted to do was describe the Strule Valley and the hay-cutting season. It’s lovely country in that season, and he would be running through the countryside. So I wrote this thing, and it came to 43,000 words. I offered it to the Talbot Press. They had a decent reader, a nice quiet civil man; and he said he didn't think I could make a hero out of someone running away from his duty. I think he was just being polite to me, but I didn't consider as duty what an unfortunate bloody private soldier did for about a shilling a day with what they had to go through in the barrack’s square. I could go in and out of the barracks then. In fact, we did our gym training for the school team in the barracks under a Seargent Major Weare, a Londoner, a Seargent Mitchell and another man called Corporal Wheeler. I remember them; they were good chaps.

Anyway the thing gathered dust for a bit, and I showed it to Francis McManus. who was becoming a great friend at the time, and Francis said: “It's a long short story, 18,000 words.” I was a bit miffed, you see. J.J. Campbell was editing The Irish Bookman for Father Sinnott; he was a good Belfast figure, and he said: “My God, I’m very hard up for copy. I could do with 18,000 words to fill out the forthcoming issue.” So I looked at my novel, and I swear to God it came down automatically to 18,000 words, and it filled out The Bookman. And it was printed. But what happened to the other words? Oh yes, 1947 it
was in *The Bookman*. But by that time, I had done a book about partition, *Counties of Contention*. And my first novel was in 1946, *Land Without Stars*. They’re reprinting that now.

F.K.: So you started out writing novels, rather than short stories?

B.K.: Yes. And that was an effort, to write a novel. That novel *Land Without Stars* was published in London by Christopher Johnson.

F.K.: That’s unusual isn’t it, to start off with a novel. Even Joyce started with short stories.

B.K.: I must have been very ambitious.

F.K.: What idea did you have about yourself as a writer then?

B.K.: It’d be hard to say that now. It was just to get down what you felt, what you knew, what you saw.

F.K.: Were you reading a lot of other writers then? writers who were important to you?

B.K.: Oh yes, along about college time it would have been William Saroyan and Graham Greene, a curious pair indeed. I was the sort of college propagator of Graham Greene in my time. In fact, I read a paper to the English lit. on him. I can’t remember if that was printed or not. I did one on Saroyan that was in, of all places, *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* and one on Carlyle, of all people, and one on G.K. Chesterton.

F.K.: One of my colleagues, Norman Sherry, is Greene’s biographer. You liked Greene a great deal, then?

B.K.: Very much, yes, it was his technique. It was quite new the way he told it. Some of it, I suppose, came from Conrad. A little bit of the early Greene, *A Rumor at Nightfall*, you’ll notice the Conrad thing there. But when he cleared out of that, the technique in a novel like *England Made Me* or *Brighton Rock* was superb. It was just the sheer way that he could get his story across. There would have been others over the years.

F.K.: It seems to me, and to others, that you have more in common with the storyteller than with someone like Greene, with your strong sense of place and the oral tradition.

B.K.: Yes.

F.K.: Did you grow up hearing stories told?

B.K.: Well, people told stories. That *Cards of the Gambler* was from old Johnny Sheamuiseen, who was a seanachie, a very formidable old man. He had the story of the gambler. It was a sort of Faustian story; God and Devil and all that were in it. I used some of it in *The Cards of the Gambler*, translated it and used little bits of it. It came to my attention actually that I’d heard the old man tell stories, but it was only in the Ulster accounts of the Gaelic League; my friend Loughran, again, edited the collection of stories of Johnny Sheamuiseen. It struck me that you could just use it and turn it into a novel about modern living.

F.K.: It’s interesting that you mentioned The Cards of the Gambler because my next question is about it. Even though it comes close to allegory, there is a strong voice; and the people are greater than the allegory.

B.K.: That’s what I was hoping to do, to use the thread of the allegory and still make it a novel about living people.
F.K.: It reminded me also of Proxopera, which has a strong political and social statement, yet the people — especially the centre figure — control the reader’s attention.

B.K.: He was modeled on an amusing man, a teacher named Curry, I got very friendly with. He died, actually, while I was in hospital, dropped while he was on his way to school. It was my father who picked him up; they were quite close friends. He was an amazing man. What I was trying to do when I cast him as Mr. Binchey was to imagine what he’d think of the set-up at the moment. So I had him there before my eyes. An amusing man, indeed, Curry. He was Shavian and Wellsian. I had a brother-in-law who was a Shavian and a Wellsian and a Chestertonian as well. They got really worked up about it in those days, you know? Because Chesterton and Shaw were all Republicans sort of.

F.K.: There are, also, those wonderful short stories like "A Ball of Malt and Madame Butterfly."

B.K.: You know that the original of Butterfly was really quite different? I altered the appearance and the name because I heard she had settled down and was respectably married, and I didn’t want to write anything that would hurt anybody. She wouldn’t have taken an action, I’m quite sure, or anything like that.

F.K.: Is that the White Horse Pub down on Eden Quay where the story’s set?

B.K.: Yes. Alas, it’s practically gone. I was down that way recently. It was beside the old Irish Press building. The O’Connell family have gone from it now. The upstairs bar is closed, and there’s some sort of small bar for young people on the ground floor. I remember one night in the White Horse when Jim McGuiness was editor of The Press. Upstairs, we had at the counter Professor Dudley Edwards. Desmond Williams, Kevin B. Nowlan, Con Leventhal (Sam Beckett’s friend), Tommy Woods (External Affairs), and Brendan Behan doing his capers in the middle of the floor. That was the night Brendan said to me: “The three ould ones [old ladies] had put down beds outside Montjoy jail and laid down on the beds with their clothes on. And President Cosgrave was going in to visit the jail for some reason, and they began to call him names.” Behan was miming it on the floor, you know. It was hilarious. And Behan knew the ould ones, at least he knew one of them, that being Maud Gonne. I met her up in father Senan’s office. The other was Mary McSweeney; that was the second ould one. He didn't know her, and I never knew Mary McSweeney. And when Cosgrave comes in they begin to shout at him: “Lloyd George's Green Linnet.” (That was what they called the Free State soldiers in the green uniforms.) “Traitor to Ireland. Arrest us! Arrest us!” Cosgrave, according to Behan, said: “I may be a promoter of Lloyd George’s Green Linnets. I may be a traitor to Ireland. But I won't arrest you; I’m not a collector of antiques.” And at this stage, Dupley Edwards said: “Brendan.” “What Dudley?” “How dare you call my mother an ould one.” She was the third one, that Brendan didn’t see in front of the jail. Dudley’s mother was a famous Suffragette. But you can imagine that performance.

F.K.: How long did you work for The Press?

B.K.: I was fourteen years there. I went over from The Independent when my first book was banned by the censorship, In A Harbour Green. The theory was that I was put out for writing dirty books. That wasn’t true, actually. I’d become friendly with M.J. McManus, who was the literary editor of The Irish Press then; and he invited me, practically. He and R.M. Smiley, editor of The Irish Times (I knew Smiley, too) and I were sitting in the Pearl Bar with Brinsley McNamara (who was a good friend of mine), so it was arranged that I would go to The Irish Press. I was interviewed when I went down there by Bill Sweetman;
and Bill Sweetman said: “I only have one thing against you (he was a great man, Sweetman). You come from the North of Ireland. I had a lot of trouble with a man from your part of the country”. (That was A. de Blacam- Sweetman and himself didn't get on). So then, he said to me: “Are you irregular?” I said: “Do you mean my bowel movement?” “No. I mean do you come in or do we have to send out for you.” So, I said I’d turn up. So that was my interview. Then M.J. died and I succeeded him. so I was fourteen or fifteen years in The Press, until I went to the States. It was quite a place to be in those days. The comings and goings were marvellous.

F.K.: There doesn't seem to have been in your writing, or that of your companions, a strong distinction between the work of a journalist and the work of a writer of fiction.

B.K.: I remember John Montague worrying about that, but I said you can’t compartment your mind. And, actually, working on a newspaper is useful to a writer of fiction. Because the good thing about newspaper men, photographers and reporters, is that their job is everybody else's business; and you hear and find out things that you wouldn't know about otherwise. You're always getting bits of information from your colleagues. I was almost housebound for Sweetman's time; I wrote editorials. And then when M. J. died, I did the literary editing. But after that when Jim McGuiness came in I had God's end of opportunity to go wandering about the country. Which was great fun. We had a driver, a hell of a time. When I would head out into the country, nobody knew what I was up to. I could go where I pleased. That was a great idea.

F.K.: Dublin of that time, I imagine, was much like you portrayed it in "A Ball of Malt and Madame Butterfly," a very democratic literary world.

B.K.: It was. Yes, it was easy going. You knew everybody. It was a free and open society.

F.K.: It looked like it was also a great deal of fun.

B.K.: It was good fun. They were great people. There were men like Austin McDonnell. I even used Austin's name in "A Ball of Malt". Austin had been sentenced to death in his time for his Irish Volunteer activities. But the sentence was commuted; he did some time, I think, in Derry jail. He was a real man, tremendously tall, handsome man. He was one of the chiefs of the Dublin Fire Brigade. A tremendous man, he had a great tenor voice which, if had a drink taken, he was inclined to sing "My Boat can lightly Float" (the Galway hooker song) or "My Dark Rosaleen".

Another story about Brendan and himself once. Austin, when he had a day off, would walk around the pubs and have a drink here and there, talk to friends. But I was sitting with Brendan upstairs in the White Horse. And Brendan was in very poor health; he had a terrible hangover. His head was practically down between his knees. Austin came in; and he had been meditating on history. He was giving a lecture on the woes and suffering of the peasants of Lewisburg, County Mayo, during the Famine. And he said: “They ran after the carts, taking the grain out of the carts with their cupped hands, catching the raw grain and eating the raw grain. And Brendan lifted his head with great weariness and said: “Austin.” “What, Brendan?” “Austin, it was fucking good enough for them.” His worries were not then with the peasants of Lewisburg in 1847; he was thinking of himself. At which Austin laughed with great splendour and sat down and bought Brendan a cure. It was a humorous and lively society around there. The Press asked me to write an article about my memories of it which, thank God, they'd didn't have to use because we just survived.
F.K.: Were Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh part of this?

Keily: They were in the neighbourhood, yes. They were around. Brian [Brian O’Nolan, a.k.a. Flann O’Brien] came and went. George Gormley, Brian’s uncle, was the last sports editor of The Evening Mail. And he was second cousin to my uncle, Peter Gormley, who died in New York some years back, who relates me to the Hanahoe family, the lawyers. So both our mothers were Gormleys, O’Brien and myself. So when his eldest brother died, the classics professor, I was out at the funeral. All the leading mourners were up from the North, and I swear to my God they were all the image of my mother. It was frightening. They came over to me and said: “We know you are one of us; you have the countenance”. Apparently, I have a McGovern face.

A very odd thing happened to me in a bar in the Eighties in New York when I was first there. Kevin Sullivan said: “The man who runs the bar says if you have a drink anywhere else before you have a drink in his pub, he’ll never speak to you again”. Well, I was visiting with Jim Carroll, who was the nephew of Jim Carroll who was Lord Mayor of Dublin here. Great people. Jim, the younger (the old man’s dead now), Jim’s back farming in the West now. So I went up to the pub and when the owner came in he was a Colonel Gormley, U.S. Army Retired; when he heard my mother’s name was Gormley, the pub was mine. Drinks on the house for all and sundry. And in strolled two policemen; you couldn't see them for pistols. I thought it was a raid or something; they were off duty and in for a drink. By this time I was beginning to talk like Myles, and I said that I would prefer if they removed the pistols because I worried that the least academic disagreement might lead a fatal arbitrament. No bother. They put away the pistols.

Then this old man came over to me. Now John Wilson, the minister, knows this story about a good man who runs the pub at Bulter’s Bridge. And they knew the old schoolmaster referred to and said this man who spoke to me was quite right, said the resemblance was weird. This old man came up to me and said: “You’re name is McGovern.” I said: “It isn’t, but it’s a very odd thing you should say so.” He said: “You're the living double of a master McGovern from Crosherlough in the County Cavan that I knew in the old country”. I said: “Where did he come from.” He said that he came from Glangevlin where the Shannon River rises. Well, I said: “My father's mother was McGovern from Glangevlin where the Shannon River races”. Isn't that weird. But John said he knew this old schoolteacher; there was no doubt about it. So I haven't the Gormley face, but Brian and myself have part of the Gormley name.

Probably, the first reference I ever encountered to Paddy Kavanagh was when I was working in the Post Office in Omagh, and I read The Irish Press every morning to protect myself from the inroads of British imperialism. In the spring of 1936, there was an article on the front page with the credit line, Peter O’Curry. Peter had edited The Dundalk Examiner; then he moved up to Dublin to The Irish Press; and then he edited The Weekly Standard. The article was about going to Inishkeen to meet this young poet [Patrick Kavanagh] who had his first book of poems published. And the poet came out over the threshold saying: “I was called ‘an idler by the noisy set/ of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen/ The martyrs call the world’”. The Standard, I met Peter O’Curry the first paper I read to the English Lit. at college, the one on Chesterton; I was already on a retainer from Senan at the time; whether I wrote for him or not, I had a retainer from him. And Peter took the chair for the reading of this brilliant paper; and he said to me after: “What are you going to do with yourself?” I said high school
teaching or something. He said: “Do you want a job? Come down to me tomorrow and you’ll have one.” And he offered me a part time job while I was still in college on *The Weekly Standard*. And Paddy and himself has always remained friendly; in fact, Patrick’s *A Soul for Sale* is dedicated to Peter O’Curry.

Paddy was a bit hard up at the time, and Peter brought him on the staff of *The Standard* while I was still there. I was doing the films, too, for *The Standard*. When I went on to *The Independent*, then Paddy took on the film column after me. But he gave up going to films after the interim of *Gone With the Wind*. He never went back to films again; he just reviewed them from the advance publicity after that. Said it was simpler.

As a matter of fact, the very first time that “Raglan Road” was sung, She was in college with me. Now Paddy and herself used to be seen having tea in Michell’s select little tea shop at the bottom of Grafton Street; it’s no longer there. And her family, who were very well-to-do, heard about her going about with this threadbare poet. Of course, they raised bloody murder, and that was the end of that.

But he came into me one day and Kevin B. Nowlan (I’d brought Kevin B. into *The Standard* to write editorials; Peter asked me to bring some college chaps in) and Kevin and myself were in this room; and Paddy came in and had written it out in pencil; and his spelling was worse than the spelling of Mr. Yeats; and he said could we sing that L to the air of “The Dawning of the Day”? So Kevin and myself stood up and said we could try. If you ever heard Kevin B. Nowlan and myself singing together, cacophony. Oh my God. So the three of us began to sing “Raglan Road”; and Peter O’Curry came in and said: “What in hell’s name is going on in here?” So we explained, and Peter joined in; and that was the first time “Raglan Road” was ever sung. It was an incredible quartet: Kevin B., Paddy, myself, and Peter O’Curry. But Paddy, he was always good. From some most ordinary event, he could really begin talking, some trivial, semi-sort of ordinary event, he could begin talking; and the vine would rise from it, you know, to all sorts of lofty considerations. He was rather interesting that way. And behind all the anger and gruffness, he was a gentle-hearted fellow.

F.K.: When did you go to America?
B.K.: Sixty-four. It was Louis Rubin rang me one night to go out there. He was excellent. I was at Hollins College with John Rees Moore and Lex Allen. It was a very pleasant place.

F.K.: You were publishing a lot in *The New Yorker* then?
B.K.: Quite a lot. And before then. The first story, oddly enough Sean White did a bit of *The Captain With the Whiskers* in *Irish Writing*, and Maxwell in New York wrote to him about it and asked had I written short stories and would I send him short stories, so that was the beginning of my contact with *The New Yorker*. Maxwell and Rachel MacKenzie were my chief contacts there.

F.K.: I guess it’s because the Irish short story has gotten so much attention that, it seems to me anyway, that your short stories have gotten more attention than the novels.
B.K.: That’s possibly true.

F.K.: But I’ve enjoyed the novels just as much. What have you been working on since Proxopera?
B.K.: I have two in mind at the moment. One, I always promised myself to do, is a novel on the famous Montgomery-Glass murder case in Newtownstewart in 1875. Not so
much the murderer or the man he murdered, but the figures who stood around it. A school friend of mine, Brian McBride, up there a local historian, (a very good man) did a stage play on it. Denis Johnston and Phillip Rooney both did radio plays of it. It was a celebrated case; an assistant inspector of police murdered a bank cashier. Money was involved in it, aight because Montgomery was in financial difficulties; but there was more to it than that. I think the year had something to do with it; the Franco-Prussian War was just over. Montgomery was the iron man, and regarded his friend as the decadent French; there was something of that in it. But then the people who were around the murder case are fascinating. The local petty sessions clerk and post master was a man called Gordon, who wrote a little book about the whole affair. And this book came into my possession some years ago. This Gordon also wrote poetry. Well, decent verse. But really, as I said, it's not the murder itself so much as the people who stood around it. I have little bits of it written here and there.

F.K.: How are your memoirs coming?

B.K.: Well, Methuen has done the first part of it. The second, well, chunks of it are written. The first one is about growing up in Omagh and the people I grew up with. And the second will be about Dublin. I took the title, Drink to the Bird out of Edward Arlington Robinson's poem, “Mr. Flood's Party”;

Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before. Drink to the bird.

When he puts the jug down on the ground, he puts it down very tenderly on the ground, “knowing that most things break”. Patrick Colum knew Robinson very well; he used to talk about him a bit.

F.K.: What made you come to Dublin from the North?

B.K.: Well, I always knew Dublin because I had a sister living here. And so I used to come up on holidays, even when I was a kid. I was first in Dublin, I think, when I was ten years of age. I came up with my father. But I've been permanently in Dublin since 1940. (I was in the orthopedic hospital out Finglas way, but that wouldn't count). I came up then to go to college when I came out of hospital. I had been briefly with the Jesuits before I was in hospital, but that was down in the Midlands. But I knew Dublin. I had a brother-in-law, Tom Stanley, who taught me how to know Dublin: go to Nelson Pillar and take any tram to its terminus and then walk back to the Pillar along the tram tracks. You couldn't get lost, you see. That was when the trams were coming and going at the Pillar. A three pence, that was to get me from the Pillar back to home on the tram. And I saw old John Milton's Latin poems in a bookstore, and I expended my three pence. To get back to the Pillar, I had to go on walking then; I was footsore by the time I got home.

F.K.: Except for Proxopera has the North figured in your writing?

B.K.: Well, the Carmincrop Cross thing, of course. I go up there quite a lot, too. I'm a freeman of Omagh. It's a good town, too. It was a good town to grow up in. Still, it's a good town to visit.

F.K.: So, then, you're well settled in Dublin?

B.K.: Oh yes, Dublin more than any place else. But if you're not born here, you still wouldn't be accepted. You might be described as a Dubliner, but not as a Dublin man.
There's a subtle difference there: a Dublin man is the genuine article. There's Seamus Kavanagh's definition: a Dublin man doesn't go home for Christmas; he is at home. It's subtle, that. Kavanagh, I don't know if you ever encountered him; he was an actor, retired from acting into radio work and the like. He was a great humourist. He was good at definitions; incest was cashing a check in your own bank.

F.K.: I heard a terrible one. Two ould ones were shopping on Moore Street. Looking at carrots in a cart, one ould one pointed to a huge carrot and said: 'That reminds me of my husband.' "Is it the length of it?" "No, it's not the length of it." "Is it the width of it?" "No, it's not the width of it." "Well, if it's not the length of it and it's not the width of it, what about it reminds you of your husband?" "It's the dirt on it." I heard that from some of the women of Enniskerry.

B.K.: Frank, I notice you said you heard that from the women not the ladies, of Enniskerry. That reminds me of Peter Grimes' St Augustine I started reading once and never finished. Now Augustine really got worked up about sex and baptism and all that and was in controversy with Julian. Very strange man, Augustine was. Wisdom in him, alright; but by God there was a lot of other things in him too. I think that carrot story would have flattened him.