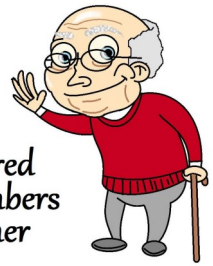


Times Past; Eternal Future



Retired Members Corner

Recently I enjoyed a BBC TV programme called "Walk the Line" in which Barra Best walked along the route of several Northern Ireland abandoned railway lines. Most of the lines were very familiar to me, since I was a frequent train traveller before I owned my first motor car (1960). I was particularly intrigued by the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway (SLNCR) line which ran from Sligo to Enniskillen, crossing the border at Black Lion/Belcoo. Mr Best failed to mention the name the locals used for this line – the Slow, Late and Never Come Railway. In 1953 I was the Customs Officer responsible for examining the goods imported into Northern Ireland on this line.

Another cross-border line with which I was involved was the Bundoran Junction to Bundoran track passing through Kesh, Pettigo, Belleek and Ballyshannon, operated by the Great Northern Railway (GNR). I was stationed at Belleek in 1952. This line was peculiar because half way along it crossed and recrossed the border at Pettigo which, of course, is in Donegal. One of my men (a Land Preventive Man) always travelled on every train and took a note of everyone who got on at Pettigo so that they could be questioned when the train crossed back into the UK. Anyone going from Pettigo to Ballyshannon was given a handshake, but if you were getting off at Belleek you were questioned.

Barra Best is from Northern Ireland and managed to have some interesting conversations with locals along the way. I was in HM Customs & Excise, a Yorkshireman, having previously worked on the docks in Liverpool, in a distillery in Hull, another distillery in Dumbarton and a brewery in Glasgow. To say I got confused at times is an understatement. I remember getting a phone call in my office in Enniskillen. I heard a female voice on the line but I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. In those days there was no trunk dialling; you made calls via the telephonist. A lady in the telephone exchange was listening to our befuddled conversation and she acted as an intermediary. She told me I was speaking to a farmer's wife in Leitrim who was going to a wedding in Enniskillen, and wanted to know if there would be Customs duty on her new hat. I said there would be no duty if it was made in Ireland, but there may be Purchase Tax if she sold it to someone at the wedding. The best thing she should do is fix



it on her head with hat pins then she could prove it was a personal effect like the rest of her clothing.

Whilst I was in Belleek His Majesty's Custom & Excise became Her Majesty's Customs & Excise and the Queen was crowned when I was in Enniskillen. She had become Queen whilst visiting Kenya, another place with which I'm familiar. The nation was informed that on 9 September this year the Queen became the longest reigning monarch in British history. Give or take a few days I'm the same age as the Queen. That being so, events in my life often parallel similar events in the Queen's life. We were both conscripted at 18 during World War II. She was a driver in the ATS. I was a radio mechanic in the Royal Corps of Signals. She was in South Africa on her 21st birthday; I was in West Africa on my 21st birthday. Eventually, in 1986, when we were both 60, we met in Buckingham Palace and she asked me what my job was. I told her I was in Her Majesty's Customs and Excise in Northern Ireland. She looked me over and repeated "in Northern Ireland", no doubt thinking he is lucky to be still alive. I was there in recognition of deeds done on behalf of the next of kin of colleagues shot, blown up, kidnapped or badly wounded whilst serving on the border with the Republic.

A day will dawn in the not too distant future when I will awake to find myself in the presence of the King of Kings. He will not ask me what my job was – He will know because He had it all planned out long before I was born. I received an invitation to attend at Buckingham Palace. You are not invited to die. There is no option. You can, however, make preparation for that eventuality. I was advised as to what to wear in Her Majesty's presence. The Bible tells me my garments must be spotlessly clean, I must be clothed in His righteousness for only the Lord Jesus is entitled to enter heaven on His own merit. How do you get your clothes so clean? They have to be washed in the blood of the Lamb, the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. The alternative is too horrendous to contemplate. Hell, the place reserved for the devil and his demons where souls are tormented day and night for ever and ever. God desires that none should perish. His one desire is that you should accept His Son as your Lord and Saviour.