

## EILEEN OWENS

Eileen was born Ellen McGowan in Kinlough, Co Leitrim, Ireland on July 1st 1927. She was the youngest of five children, with two brothers and two sisters. Eileen is the last surviving member of that generation, her brother Barney having passed away a couple of weeks before her. Like my father Laurie, Eileen lost her father at the age of 6 before she really knew him so my parents were both raised by their mothers. As with Laurie's childhood, life was hard. My maternal grandmother had to run a farm as well as rear a family though they were not the poorest family in the neighbourhood, for they owned a cow and the children all wore shoes to school. (We have a photograph of Eileen's primary school with several shoeless children in the front row.) I visited the family home in Bundoran with my mother in the early 1980s, and even then making tea involved going to fetch a bottle of milk that was being refrigerated in the stream and a peat stove warmed the front room. Eileen often recalled the shock she felt when immediately after the end of the Second World War, she followed her two elder sisters to work in England as a nurse. It was her first experience of train travel and of life in an industrial society.

Eileen was sent for training to Salford Royal Infirmary in Manchester but soon contracted tuberculosis and found herself being treated as a patient on the TB ward, much to the Matron's annoyance. Recovering her health, Eileen moved around hospitals in the North West and then down to London where for most of the 1950s she worked as a midwife and a district nurse. In later years, Eileen lived a life of suburban respectability but during the 1950s she had a fair amount to do with the seedier side of London. Her district was in West End, which brought her into contact with denizens of Theatreland and she recalled having to deal with the aftermath of drug abuse, illegal abortions and so forth. I remember my mother as a rather anxious person but also as someone who could be good in a crisis, calmly taking very effective action. No doubt her days on that district had prepared her.

It was during this period of nursing in the West End that my parents met at, I believe, a Parish dance in Holborn. I've already noted how much of a background they had in common. They were both devout Catholics and both married relatively late in life for that era. Laurie and Eileen would each have benefitted greatly from receiving more education than they did but neither was inclined to resent this. They accepted their lot in life and settled down to rear a family.

My parents were married in Brighton where Eileen was working in 1960. Moving back to London, they lived between a Church, a nunnery and a school in Somers town alongside Euston Station but the area was deemed unsuitable for raising children so, after the birth of their second child Denise, they fled to the leafy suburbs, to Northwood Hills where they remained for the rest of their lives. Eileen continued working as a nurse on the district in Northwood, albeit with less memorable patients than before, until she retired in 1987.

Eileen and Laurie were selfless parents who devoted their lives to us their children. Despite earning relatively little money, they sent both my brother Nigel and I to fee paying schools to ensure we had a good Catholic education. Juggling nursing with family life meant Eileen had little time for other amusements but she did enjoy the company of people outside the family circle, much more so than my father. Eileen was the public face of the family, maintaining relations with the neighbours, with her sister Cotti in London, her relatives in Ireland and with old friends she had trained or worked with as nurses and whom she used to see from time to time. She would also welcome the occasional guest brought to the house by one of her children. In so far as we acquired any social skills from our parents that was down to my mother. Eileen also took charge of the financial and most other practical aspects of family life. She was concerned about planning for the future, something that didn't really interest Laurie. He saw everything from the perspective of eternity whilst Eileen was willing to engage with earthly needs and realities. Laurie moved jobs frequently and never bothered about pensions: it was my mother who ensured they had a reasonably comfortable retirement. Eileen's practicality played to my own advantage when I was born with protruding ears. It was proposed that I be taken in Great Ormond Street for

surgery to have the ears pinned back but my father could see no point in the procedure; fortunately for me, Eileen insisted and it was done.

Laurie and Eileen enjoyed a happy and well-deserved retirement during the 1990s. They moved from the family house in Potter Street to a bungalow in Waverley Gardens that was smaller and more manageable but also had a better garden. My mother spent her time tending to the plants, seeing more of her friends, going on occasional trips to Ireland to visit relations or to Rome and the Holy Land with the Church. In the mid-2000s it became clear that Laurie was suffering from Alzheimer's and my mother's nursing skills were useful once more. Towards the end he really required the level of care only a nursing home can provide but no suitable home became available and Eileen tended him with great skill and patience right through to his death in 2013.

Eileen was a fiercely independent person and had no desire to leave her bungalow but after several falls and a Parkinson's diagnosis, it became clear that she could no longer live alone. Almost exactly two years ago, she reluctantly moved into a room in St. Vincent's on Wiltshire Lane. I can't pretend this was the happiest period of her life but I'm pretty sure she was happier there than she would have been anywhere else, surrounded by people like herself, devout Catholics, many nuns and priests, not a few from County Leitrim and hearing mass every day in the Chapel. The nurses cared for her magnificently in her final days, easing her suffering, something for which we are deeply grateful.

Eileen remained faithful to the Church throughout her life. She attended daily mass whenever possible and without fail once she had retired. She dragged us all to confession. In the parish she served as a Communion minister and made a point of paying social visits to elderly parishioners who would otherwise have become isolated. Towards the end she prayed for the Lord to take her, anxious about the journey ahead but confident in the promise of eternal life.

**David Owens**

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