Stone mad

SEAMUS MURPHY

THE
BLACKSTAFF
PRESS
BELFAST

Seamus Murphy (1907–1975) was born in County Cork, Ireland. He commenced work as an apprentice stonecutter in 1922 while at the same time, inspired by his school teacher Daniel Corkery he studied clay modelling at the Crawford School of Art.

In writing Stone Mad (1950) we are indebted to him for recording the passing of the traditional craft of stonecutting. The book is full of warmth, humour and tenderness and although a bible for workers in stone it has continued to be read with great appeal by humanity as a whole. Although a stonecutter, letterer, carver and sculptor it his decorative carvings that are unique and individual. While others followed the usual Celtic patterns he developed his own style. In lettering too he broke away from the established rather mechanical forms that had developed. His headstones are unique with strong layouts and delightful carvings. It is time his carvings were reappraised.

Although he became well known through his book in his lifetime he remarked that “reknown doesn’t buy bread and butter, but headstones do. I don’t believe the half of what I read, but I’m going into Jackies, now for a pint and that’s no myth.”

—Pat McAfee

THERE were about thirty men working in the yard, counting stone-carvers, stone-cutters, stone-polishers and labourers. Stone-cutting, like most other trades, is a closed trade, and nobody can become a stone-cutter unless his father is one.

Stone-carving, on the other hand, is open, and anyone can become an apprentice to it, provided, of course, there is enough work to keep a few carvers going while the apprenticeship is being served. Otherwise a boy has little or no chance of learning the trade.

Stone-cutters occasionally do a little stone-carving, as carvers are not always available when an urgent job is required but carvers are never allowed to do any stone-cutting.

The craft of stone-carving is rapidly disappearing. During the last forty years, there were, as far as I know, five carvers turned out in Cork, including myself. Not that there was ever any native tradition of stone-carving in Cork, or in Ireland for that matter. Most of those who worked here were descendants of English stone-carvers who came to Ireland following Catholic Emancipation, when church-building received a new impetus.

Many of them set up their shops in Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street), Dublin, and most of the men I worked with had served their time there. John Broe, Mark Barnes, Edgar Barnes, Louis Free, Harry Thompson, the Tomlins, the Smiths, James Walton, William Mervin, are names that bespeak their origin.

The craft of stone-cutting, in Cork at least, is in no better shape. Its total strength as I write does not exceed fifteen members, including apprentices. Most of the others are working in England, some of them as labourers — a nice fate for skilled men, to end their days as navvies in a foreign country!

Still, I suppose this is nothing unusual. Since mediæval times journeymen have been travelling from place to place carrying on their backs a bag of tools and a few belongings, stopping where they find work or pleasure, and passing on, becoming acquainted with men and things. In many ways this was important in training the young men, as they saw what the craft was doing in other parts of the country and it put them in touch with new methods; they themselves, perhaps, bringing to the workshops new ways and ideas which might improve the tradition.

We do know that they were always welcomed by other journeymen, who found work for them and, in the case of certain crafts, the master kept them in his own house 'by bread and tankard'. Some of the privileges established by the Guilds hold good to this day and one of them, that of the right to have beer at 11 o'clock in the morning, though abolished owing to abuse in most trades now, is still held by the 'Dust' (as we call members of the stone craft), their case being that it is thirsty work.

So one of my jobs in the yard was that of Number One beer-carrier to a thirsty crew, a position I occupied for about four years until I was relieved by another apprentice. It was a task which required no small amount of skill as often I had to try and make a 'dive' when the foreman's back was turned

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at any time during the day. The black gallons, the tin cans used for this job, were 'planted' in amongst the stones 'on the run home'. Each man had a special hideout for his gallon, trade honoured no ethics and a pint was gulped back wherever it was found. When this happened it caused me great consternation. The owner questioned me as to the exact time I put the gallon in position, who was about at the time and whether I had let anyone see me put it there! However, I always managed to wangle out of it, while the curse of the Seven Snotty Orphans was put on the scoundrel that stole it.

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Another tramp stonie was known as the Goban. I had been hearing stories about him for years before he showed up. Actually he was a legend in the trade. He seldom worked in the cities but generally in out of the way places and he never stayed very long in any job. As he said to me:

'There are three important things to consider if you want to stay in a place: the men, the work, and the stone. If the men are good I'm inclined to stay, and if the work is interesting I forget the men, but if the stone is bad, nothing could keep me! Because, dammit, nothing torments a man more than nursing a treacherous bitch of a stone only to find after all your trouble that it was only blackguarding you. Just as you are about to say "I'm a thunderin' bit of flesh to handle that cantankerous lump," and feel you've begun to master it, out you'll blow a corner. It happened to me with a block of the free-way Aherla. I had the stone worked and was just square-chiselling the margin when off came about four inches of the end.

'Now, anyone could see it was a level. It was a rusty colour where the water had got into it. I went up to the gaffer and said: "I've blown out a corner," showing him the level. "'Twas in it," says I. "I know bloody well it was," said he, "but 'tisn't in it now, and that's what you're paid for—to keep it in it." I packed up on the spot. That's the sort of thing that get's a man down.'

'I remember a figure carver from Dublin who was always taking skelps off his knuckles. 'Tis surprising to me how he had a hand at all! You should see the tools he worked with! A few six-inch nails would do as much. And in his excitement to cut away something he had spotted he would often hit the tool on the cutting edge and then look at it with amazement, wondering how it got to be in that position. He had me pestered with sharpening tools for him. He was a hopeless hand at the forge, and along with that he had no interest in tools. He had no kit—just borrowed off every man in the shed, and by the time he was done with them, the tools were no more good. You might as well leave them to him. The heads would be battered and spread like mushrooms. His hands were like butchers' blocks from all the misses and from letting his fingers slip up and down and get caught in the head of the tool where it was spread. A spread

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