

Dublin In black and white.

Everything during those couple of days I recall in black and white or tones of sepia. We travelled to Dublin in our first car. A black Austin Seven. It must have been summertime, Northern Ireland's Twelfth fortnight, the only time my father had a full week off work. While I recall more than my siblings, our common memory is of O'Connell Street. The city was big. And O'Connell Street was as wide as a football field. Flanked by tall grey buildings, the centre of the boulevard was lined with parked cars and bicycles, with Nelson on his column. At night, weak light from roof-level neon signs spelt out the names of Players cigarettes, of Guinness and Harp beer, facing towards the southside of the river.



Ena and Tommy McWilliams c.1950

We entered into one of the five-story buildings on O'Connell Street, on the left, less than one hundred yards north of the River Liffey. From the city footpath, we clattered up the lino-covered stairs with our bags and cases to the landing of our guest house. Leaving the parade of pedestrians, bicycles, cars, and buses, to be marshalled by black-uniformed Guards. Little light penetrated far into the building.

Our parents had honeymooned in Dublin over a decade earlier and probably yearned for those simpler, more romantic times. Now, with four children, the youngest five, life was busy and full. A long car trip, though still a novelty, would have been a fractious affair. My father's patience would have been sorely tested. I climbed the dark winding stairwell of Nelson's Column with him, out onto a square platform

to dizzying views of the streets below. The scene beyond folded into a low grey cloud. Nelson would stand tall for another five years or so until a maverick Republican took him down to street level.

The woman of the guesthouse offered to mind us for an evening. The younger two slept early, and myself and my brother were parked on straight-backed dining room chairs in the guest's drawing room, in front of an incredible novelty, a television. We watched one of the British TV channels, the only ones that could be picked up in the years before Irish television came on air. A single orange electric bulb backlit the room. We watched a sci-fi episode, 'Elegy', part of the US production 'The Twilight Zone'.

Mesmerised by moving pictures, we saw the crew of a grey US spaceship land on an earth-like alien planet. The three crew were shocked to find all the humans were completely motionless, frozen at their various tasks. They were eventually welcomed by a friendly figure of an old man in his large house. The scenes that unfolded of these rigid, yet realistic people became more and more creepy and scary: a town election, a beauty pageant, a farmyard, where no one moved. The crew were dined, and then poisoned by their host, and died there, right in front of us, on the screen. The final scene saw the old man, accompanied by weirdly bright and happy music, dusting the bodies of the three astronauts sitting forever paralysed in their spaceship. My first TV viewing would have been memorable, but the effect of this frightening sci-fi has left its indelible mark. I suspect that sleep that night, in a strange bed, came late.



Tommy at Larkfield with his first car an Austin Seven, c 1960.

Outside, we didn't see the shadowed holes left by bullets and shrapnel that peppered the walls of the buildings, and particularly the façade and portico of rebel headquarters at the General Post Office a short distance from our guesthouse. The dust had settled on the Easter Rising over forty years previous, and Ireland was in the early years of Seán Lemass's leadership. The city was starting to show a growing national confidence and optimism, though the rest of the country was still blighted by dark times of unemployment and mass emigration.

Did I enjoy that first trip to a city I have long since come to appreciate? Judging by these scant memories, probably not. I've no recollection of the drive back home. Most likely, we went west to Manorhamilton in County Leitrim. To our grandparents' farmhouse, without electric light and running water, where we would continue the annual ritual of happy summertime holidays that remained for more than a decade.

End

A synopsis of Elegy can be viewed [here](#).