

# *Mystical Journey*

An Autobiography

William Johnston

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# *The Black North*

AN INDIAN FRIEND ONCE TOLD ME that if he ever came to write his autobiography he would call it “My Cup Overflows.” Alas, my friend Tony died tragically in a bus crash and his autobiography never saw the light. Much as I would like to follow his example and make my autobiography a hymn of praise, I cannot do that while my story remains in Ireland. I must turn my eyes toward Asia where I see the rise of a new, mystical Christianity that, in dialogue with Asian spirituality, will wonderfully serve the world.

But first let me reflect on my early days in Northern Ireland.

I was born in Belfast in 1925. I learned that James Craig, later known as Lord Craigavon, prime minister of the Stormont Parliament, called his government a Protestant government for a Protestant people. His successor Basil Brooke boasted that he didn’t have a Catholic around his place because Catholics were 90 percent disloyal. There was some truth in this. The northern six counties—“the black north” they were called—were divided into Protestant districts and Catholic districts. The Protestant ascendancy held the money, the property, and the good jobs, while the Catholic minority were hewers of wood and drawers of water. “Croppy, lie down” was the slogan of the Stormont Government.

I was born in the Falls Road, the heart of the IRA district. My parents had lived in another area that was too dangerous for Catholics, and so they swapped houses with a Protestant gentleman who lived in the Falls and wanted to get out. This was in 1921 when the violence was at its height. When the Protestant gentleman got out, my parents with their two babies moved in.

When I was born, things had simmered down and even the Falls was relatively peaceful. But I heard stories, terrible and frightening stories,



*My parents, William Johnston and Winnie Clearkin, on their wedding day in Belfast, 1918.*

of the cruelty and violence of the so-called troubles.

My parents, like almost all the Catholics in the Falls, supported the rebellion against the British and sometimes gave shelter to IRA gunmen. My mother was proud that Hugh McKelvey, a prominent IRA leader, had spent a night in our house. Not surprisingly, we were raided by the military and the police. My mother told us of how she once said in exasperation, “What are you looking for?” And the Scottish com-

mander replied: “Guns, Madam, guns! We know there are guns around; but we can’t find them.” My mother belonged to the women’s division of the IRA, known by its Gaelic name, *Cumman na mBan*, and when the soldiers came banging on the door she would drop her incriminating badge into a bowl of cream before letting the intruders in.

There was also a good deal of laughter and fun. Between our house and that of the family next door, whose name was Close, there was a secret door so that, even when there was a curfew, the families could play cards. “Leo Close was a great mathematician,” my father used to say. Sometimes when the soldiers came and it was not safe for the men to remain in the house, they would creep into the neighboring little garden that was used for making headstones for graves. One time my father found himself sitting under a headstone that read: “Sacred to the Memory of William Johnston.”

Then there was the story of my mother’s brother Phonsie—our Uncle Phonsie—a true blue, an admirer of the Union Jack, who had spent his life as a doctor working in British colonies in Africa. Unknowingly he carried guns across Belfast with his golf clubs.

And guns there were. Close to our house was a big Protestant cemetery. One time the rowdy “Protestant crowd” returning through the Catholic area to their homes began to sing a famous anti-papal song, “O Dolly’s Braes,” and to dance in the street:

The song we’ll sing  
Is kick the pope  
Right over Dolly’s Braes.

My father was standing at the window looking out. Three shots rang out; and three of the dancers fell dead on the street. The sudden change of mood in the crowd was awesome as they fled back to their home in the Shankhill Road.

At the center of the conflict was hatred for the pope. The Protestants shouted, “To hell with the pope!” The Catholics sang about “the panting heart of Rome” and “God bless our pope, the great, the good.”

The two big houses still stand at the bottom of the Whiterock Road and terrible scenes of violence were to continue, even at the end of the twentieth century. In my time there was a broken window at the top of our house, the glass having been shattered by a bullet. My mother refused to have it fixed. She wanted it to remain as a memory of what the British had done in our country.

BUT LET ME GET BACK to our family.

I was the youngest of four boys. After my mother had given birth to three sons, she was hoping for a girl. Years later she told me how, when she got the news about me, she clenched her fists in bed and said, “Another boy!” But this initial rejection quickly changed to love, and I was thoroughly spoiled. I had a peaches-and-cream complexion and red curls which, after they were cut, my mother kept in a box. “I would love to paint that child,” said James Craig, a famous artist.

At the age of two and a half, however, I got diphtheria (“dip” it was called) and Dr. Robb saved my life by putting a tube into my throat. One of my earliest memories is of jumping up and down in the taxi going home and everyone laughing.

My mother’s family was quite traditional. Her father, Thomas Clearkin—“Pa” she called him—was born to a well-to-do farming family in County Monaghan. It was said that if one of the boys went out to milk the cows he would end up in America. Pa, however, went to the little town of

Larne where he became the principal of the Technical School, a wonder for a papist. He married Mary MacErlean from Cushendun and they had seven children. The two boys became doctors and all five girls became teachers. The Clearkins, my poor father's family thought, were awful snobs.

My mother, Winnie Clearkin, was very intelligent. She earned a degree in mathematics from Queen's University at a time when women were supposed to wash the dishes. But at heart she was literary rather than mathematical. She loved Wordsworth and the romantic poets and she had a flair for writing. She was also musical and loved Beethoven.

At the teachers' Training College in the Falls Road, run by the Dominican sisters, my mother got in with a group of pious yet nationalistic girls. And it was there that she joined the women's division of the IRA. She was crazy about her Pa. "He was a great man," she often said.

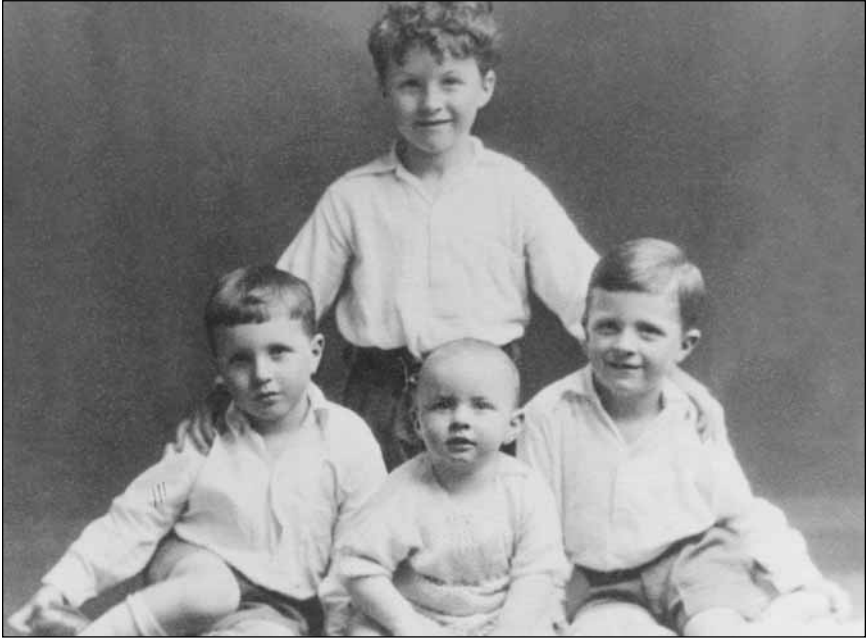
My father's family, the Johnstons, were more plebeian. Born in Leeson Street at the bottom of the Falls Road, my father was the youngest of a large family, two of whom died in the Battle of Jutland in World War I. A poor boy, my father first sold newspapers and then worked his way up, eventually earning university degrees in commerce and in law. In addition he was an athlete who ran the mile.

My father was literary also. He loved to read us Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and he was forever quoting *Hamlet*. Getting up from a siesta he would say: "I will arise and go now, and take a cup of tea." But deep down he was a workingman and he always voted for the British Labor Party.

ONCE MY FATHER'S ELDEST SISTER, my Aunt Mary, said to me: "Your great, great grandfather was a bigoted Orangeman." I innocently mentioned this to my mother who said hastily, "Don't tell that to anyone!" Then she drew herself up and said proudly, "I am completely Irish." Like all the Irish, she was descended from kings. In her case the kings were the Four Masters, great writers whose name was something like Cleary. Her cousin was a Jesuit historian, John McErlean, who traced his family back to the Scottish Highlands, claiming that it had originated in Ireland.

Later my brother Kevin studied the Johnston history and found to his embarrassment that the original Johnstons might have been Scottish soldiers who had come to Ireland to drive the natives to hell or to Connaught. Then one of these soldiers fell in love with a papist colleen; and that was that.

Brought up in a violently Republican atmosphere, my loyalist name was always an embarrassment. My brothers were Thomas after Pa; Kevin



*The Johnston boys, Tom, Kevin, Eamon, and baby Billy.*

after Kevin Barry; and Eamon after De Valera. But I was William Johnston! Was I named after William of Orange who crossed the Boyne? When I, the fourth boy, was born, it seems that my father said definitively, “This one will be called after me. William and no second name.” His father was William and the name was widespread in his family.

Much later a Jesuit teacher in Liverpool laughed at me and said, “A weak-kneed lowlander.” I never forgot that. And my Jesuit master of novices was at first astonished at the arrival of this Protestant novice from the North. “Your cousin John McErlean was a Catholic,” he mused. Others asked if my father was a Catholic.

If only my name had been Patrick O’Connell or Michael O’Rourke!

Only decades later did I become proud of my ecumenical blood and ashamed of the IRA atrocities. I began to see sterling qualities in the Scots Presbyterians, qualities that the Catholics needed. The Scots Presbyterians were efficient, hardworking, honest, and sincere, compared with the easy-going, soft-spoken, devious southerners with their blarney. Let me here make a brief digression.

Visiting busy and bustling Hong Kong before its return to mainland China in 1997, I asked a Spanish friend, “Why is Hong Kong so efficient

and prosperous while Macau is a mess? “That’s easy,” he said. “The British were Protestants and the Portuguese were Catholics.”

He said a mouthful there.

WHAT BROUGHT MY PARENTS TOGETHER was music and literature. My mother first met my father when she heard him sing in the choir of St. Paul’s church. “Who is that fellow who sings so beautifully?” my mother had asked. They fell very much in love—though they fought a lot, it seems—and after marriage they toured Ireland, my father singing Irish songs in his rich baritone voice and my mother playing the piano.

At home we had sing-songs with my father singing *Annie Laurie*, *Love Thee, Dearest*, and *Eileen Alana*. After singing his solo, my father would wave his hand as conductor and we would all sing the chorus: “Soon I’ll be back to the colleen I adore . . .” At the end, my father would sigh, “My singing days are over.”

Yet there was a Freudian tension in the family between the Johnstons and the Clearkins, and I was on the Clearkin side. I can recall—I must have been two or three years of age—furiously pushing aside my father’s grisly chin and shouting, “Go away, Daddy. I want Mummy.” This became a standard joke in the family, but I suspect that my father was deeply hurt. Again, I can remember crying in the dark, with only a little red light shining, until my mother came to console me. At another time, I had a dream that I will never forget: a slim man, dressed in black with a top hat and a walking stick, bounced cheerfully into my room when I was in bed. I screamed with fear and my mother came to embrace and console me.

On holidays we often visited Cushendun and went out on boats with the fisherman whom we called “John o’ the Rocks.” “The boat’ll fall. The boat’ll fall,” I used to scream. At other times my father, when he was still young and vigorous, would pick us up in his arms and run into the stormy sea. I can remember screaming with fear.

For schooling I went first to the kindergarten of the Dominican Convent in the Falls Road. Here my mother had many friends both among the laity and the nuns. I remember particularly a Sister Mary Pius whom my mother and her sister called “Pie.” As a boarding girl my mother thought of becoming a nun and loved to kneel in the chapel at night before the red sanctuary lamp and the Blessed Sacrament, watching the nuns come in and out. Besides being a member of the IRA, my mother was a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic. She was buried in the Dominican religious habit.

After marriage she got a part-time job, teaching in the Dominican school. One time, at some celebration, the bishop asked, "Who is that woman?" (My mother claimed that he knew her well and was putting on an act.) And when he was told that she was Mrs. Johnston he said "Mrs.? She should be at home taking care of her children." And my mother was fired.

But Winnie Clearkin was something of a feminist before her time; and she got a job at the Methodist College. She was a born teacher and wherever she went and however busy she was, she always found a teaching job.

BUT THE IRISH WAR! Was it a religious war? This is a question I have been asked again and again in Japan where the fighting between Irish Catholics and Protestants is a major scandal.

I have sometimes said that it was not a religious war but a war between the local Irish and the invaders from England and Scotland. But deep down I know that it was also a hangover from the old religious wars in Europe. "Remember 1690!" when the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne. And even further back Oliver Cromwell had quoted the Bible, "The Lord hath delivered them into our hands," when he descended with his Roundheads to slaughter the Catholics of Drogheda. And then there were the penal days and the Mass rock, and "No Pope Here" and "Home Rule is Rome Rule."

My family supported the rebellion. And we took it for granted that it was a just war, even when we did not use that terminology. Although the church condemned the violence, the priests, particularly the Franciscans, always found an excuse to absolve the gunmen. I recall my father showing me a picture of an Irish soldier in a green uniform sitting in a prison cell, his rosary dangling from his hands. And underneath were the words: "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It was dangerous to have that picture around during the so-called troubles.

Was this, then, a war of the poor against the rich, of the persecuted against the persecutors? Was it a just war? Even after I read and loved Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the Dalai Lama, I maintained a grain of sympathy with the IRA, no matter what awful atrocities they committed. "Scratch the surface of the Johnstons and you'll find the IRA," said a nephew of mine somewhat cynically.

Although this is an autobiography, I cannot help skipping a few decades ahead to speak about my conversion to total non-violence. This is an

important issue about which I will speak at greater length. Here let me refer simply to my indebtedness to three women.

The first is the Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Corrigan Maguire whom I met in Tokyo at the time of the Gulf War. Born in Belfast and horrified by state violence and injustice, she had asked a priest if it was right to take a gun and to fight. “Pray about it, Mairead,” the priest had said. So she went to church and sat down before the crucifix. Quite clearly there came to her the message of Jesus, “Love one another. Love your enemy. Thou shalt not kill. Do good to those who hate you.” And then she understood what Christianity is all about.

Two things struck me about the non-violence of Mairead. The first was that it was *active*. She became the organizer of massive peace demonstrations all over Ireland. The second thing was that it was deeply religious. It was the outcome of a mystical experience before the cross. Enough is enough! No more war!

The second woman was Dr. Priscilla Elworthy, director of the Oxford Research Group, who visited Tokyo in 2003. Traveling to Baghdad before the war she brought back a detailed proposal for peace, which went to Tony Blair, the British media, and the United States. Yet no one published it except *The Guardian* and the Quakers in the United Kingdom. Herself a Quaker, Dr. Priscilla is open to all religions; she sees a worldwide uprising of people questioning the very validity of war. A worthy recipient indeed of the Niwano Buddhist Peace Prize.

The third woman was my mother. As time went on she grew out of her narrow nationalism and became more and more cosmopolitan. Finally, she became radically pacifist. When she was old I heard her bitterly criticize the IRA for its cruel bombing in Britain. “But didn’t my mother tell me of the atrocities of the British soldiers who smashed into our house on the Falls Road?” I asked.

She just smiled.