

MICHAEL LENIHAN

My earliest I suppose recollection of the statue would be I suppose the trips into town. 'Twas always there. That's the one thing about the statue. Statue is always there like. In our fathers' memory – in our grandfathers, it was always there. It's something that is fixed – it's a fixed permanent object really in Patrick Street and I suppose we recall then what happened with Beth Gali that time when it was to be moved, like, even though if you asked many Corkonians who was responsible for erecting the statue, for sculpting the statue, they couldn't tell you. They probably couldn't tell you what year it actually went up. Now they will make the connect with Fr Mathew being the Apostle of Temperance – well the older generation anyway particularly because I think we all remember like taking the pledge at school and automatically that kinda went back, because it was through the Christian Brothers, you made your first confirmation that time, 'twas through the Christian Brothers, so the connect was still there with Fr Mathew at the time but ah, that's the one thing and the other thing of course about the statue is em the fact if you went on a bus it always ended up at the statue – like that was a fascinating thing. I often wondered like being Corkonians we all knew where you ended up when you went to the statue but it hadn't even a name. It wasn't Fr Mathew Statue – so here you are, a foreign person abroad in Cork and all of a sudden you're getting a bus into town, into the statue, I mean you often wonder what they thought, they said where is the statue? What is the statue? It had no name. It was THE statue. I mean Shandon has its name. It has the bells, its clock but I think it could only happen in Cork that you would actually have a Fr Mathew memorial to the Apostle of Temperance and it's just known as the statue. It's absolutely amazing and I often thought of that, I often wondered like I'd love to have met a tourist like and said well you're getting the bus into the statue. Do you realise where you're going like or has someone just said to you just get the bus into the statue and all of a sudden you ended up in Patrick Street and of course the very fact that of course you couldn't escape the fact that the statue was there and behind the statue was the busman's hut and the two they were inseparable really for a long long time. Now I've heard stories about it being a real drafty place and what have you, but if you were going, it was the perfect place, the statue was there, behind the statue was the busman's hut. If you want your timetable, if you want to know when the next bus was coming, if you wanted direction, I mean 'twas all there, 'twas all at the statue. Course the other thing you remember, if there was any major football match or something going on, if Cork were playing Kerry, what have you, invariably sure Fr Mathew would be decked out like, and as youngsters you'd remember that, you'd relate it to games and what have you. You can imagine then if you were in town, I mean, you can imagine the time when President Kennedy, when he came to town, that, you know, at one stage he passed the statue, and there was throngs and throngs of people and again it's just the shortest throw from the Statue to Patrick's Bridge like, so it all lines up beautifully into the city and that is what the statue is basically for me.

Q. What about that he wasn't a Corkman?

We never considered that. I mean even people that know it, I mean, we adopt somebody in Cork, I mean typical, say Rory Gallagher, I mean 'tis the same thing. He was Donegal, it's like eh for instance even getting kinda more local, look at Frank O'Connor, I mean Blarney Street claim him, Douglas Street claim him, I mean, at the end of the day, I mean, if Cork people decide to adopt somebody, that's it, they are fully blown Corkonians – done and dusted – and the fact that he done do much in Cork, he operated, he was a Capuchin, he operated from Cork, em the temperance movement

started in Cork so like you know you just wouldn't bother with a triviality about where he was originally born like, that doesn't come into the equation at all (laugh).

Q. So can you fore see then in the future...

Well that's a very interesting one really because like that the statue will always be there but you'd be concerned about the history, that history, we're losing a lot of history. It's not being taught in the schools, it's not on the curriculum in some schools for instance, and you worry about the generations coming up and I mean everything now is technologically advanced. I mean if you put a blog up now on the net, in the morning, you'd have millions of hits and you'd wonder like, the likes of the statue is there, we'll always remember it fondly and what have you, but you'd wonder with the generation coming up if they're not going to be educated as to why it's there, or have some inkling even, as to why it's there, you'd wonder what you know, will it just all evaporate and eventually people say that thing is in the way, that statue there, knock it down, it doesn't mean anything anymore.

Q. So the 150th is that important?

It's very important to commemorate it, extremely important to commemorate it, because eh like that, it's an opportunity to get the statue out there again and let people know what's it about and why it's celebrating, why it's actually in Patrick Street for 150 years and has survived - and been LOVED. I mean not alone has it survived, it's been very much loved by people and still, the statue, many's the person that had a meeting at the statue, their first date, their first jag as the man said, at the statue. I mean it's one of the landmarks, if you were to look at the different eh ... items in Corm, I mean icons really of Cork, I mean you have Shandon, you have the Shakey Bridge, you have the Statue, it's right up there, it's up there in the top ten, you have the English Market, it's right up there in the top ten - and that's where it should stay

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Now a very interesting thing that I find, being a historian and looking at images of Cork, the amount of postcards that existed, whether they were Lawrence postcards, Valentines postcards, Eason's postcards, Signal series, it's just amazing, Fr Mathew is in all of these postcards, because the principal street, he was always there. And then there was such an interest in Fr Mathew, they took pictures of the actual statue itself and sent it, 'twas sent all over the world as postcards - so there are postcards like in the States, in Australia, Britain, any part of the world, of Fr Mathew taken at the turn of the century. But something I've never been able to figure out was Fr Mathew in his guises, his many guises of being at the Statue, because I've seen some very very early views of Fr Mathew and he has this wonderful wrought iron surround and he has these kind of corbels then to protect the carriages from hitting it and then in another guise you'll see him and he has these four lovely gas lamps, and in another guise, and it's impossible at times to figure out when is all this happening, and you'll see when the whole thing is gone- I think I've one particular card by 1904 the gas lamps are gone and the railings around him are gone so he's just there on his own. There's no protection around him and he's survived really up to this time.

Q: And what about the new street design around him?

Well they played around with that again you know, they haven't moved him, the plan was to move him but that didn't happen. But it really, it doesn't em, it doesn't - it doesn't suit the statue really. It's an old statue and it should really have, something should have been done like, something old, something that would have fitted in with the heritage of the statue.

Q: And you'd be afraid for it?

Oh I'm very afraid for it, very afraid. I mean we saw what happened to the busman's hut, that is, that's languishing now in Fitzgerald's Park and there are so many memories entwined in that and it's part of our heritage. It was originally a Fireman's Hut – it's documented way back, well before the burning of the city, back to the early 1900s and all of a sudden it's just gone. I would be afraid if anything happened to the statue in the morning, if for instance something collided with it, if for some reason it started to subside, that it would be taken out and it could be lost, it could be lost to Corkonians forever.