

Bastards of Young

The following is an extract from a larger piece of work, which is centred on my upbringing in a rural Irish village, the influence of sport on the village and coming of age in the midst of the recession in Ireland.

"Well Bren, how did you get on in the repeats?"[1]

"Ah... I dunno, I never checked," Brendan replied, laughs stuttering out as he exhaled his mouthful of smoke out the window of his black Ford Focus. "I'm not going back anyway."

And that was it. Brendan was done in college and became just another Goldfieldian to have taken the extended holiday that third-level education seems to be for many at home. I laughed along, albeit more quietly than Brendan, and asked what was next for him. He told me that he didn't know and that it wasn't important at the time and I suppose he was right; it was summer and, even now, he's got the rest of his life to figure that out. Still, at least Brendan got something of an experience out of it. In the time that I sat the Leaving Certificate[2] and laboured my way through first year of university in Dublin by way of a summertime essay to make up for a failed exam, Brendan had gone through first year twice in Waterford Institute of Technology. He could have been like John McMahon, who returned from Waterford after one week, or like Seamus, who accompanied Brendan to Waterford that first year and didn't make it to Christmas, due in part to his inability to keep up with Brendan's unhinged approach to college life.

Most of us drink too much in college, but Brendan made an art of it. The pictures of the holes in the walls of his apartment spoke to me as an exercise in displaying the futility of his college experience; the kettle sitting in the middle of one such hole was the centrepiece to his neo-Dadaist masterpiece. Brendan had missed the first rung on that ladder of success that we're so often told about, but he was laughing facedown in the dirt; much as I imagine he was the time he drunkenly fell off of a wall and spent the night in hospital. He was released early the next morning so he could get pictures taken for his driving license, black eye and all. But for Brendan, and more throughout Goldfields, the first rung was impossible to step onto since the

village had tied his shoelaces together long ago.

Growing up in a village with a population of just over seven hundred people, it felt like everyone knew everyone, and so everyone witnessed everyone else's failures. It seemed unusual to me when Goldfields didn't devour the failure of McMahon coming home from Waterford after a week; perhaps it was an indication of his parents' standing within the village. Instead, we, the inquisitive youths on the green wooden bench in the centre of the village, were told that college was "a load of shite anyway" and that John was only wasting his time. Yet John represented progress in Goldfields; previous generations hadn't even taken a stab at college. With very few positive examples to follow, it's no wonder that John couldn't handle being taken out of the fishbowl in which he was held aloft because of his skill on the hurling[3] field. My brother Cian, who is the same age as John, often recalls being met with questions about why he was "bothering his arse" going to Cork every week to further his education. The fact that I've never been asked that tells me that things are still improving.

While John and Cian may have come up without much communal support or thought paid toward pursuing higher education, Brendan and I came up with examples of people who went to college, but didn't necessarily finish. It seemed like there was a fifty-fifty split in the village of those who finished and those who left after having filled their craic quota. Cian finished; John didn't. My other brother, Naoise, finished; Timmy Mahoney didn't. Conor Dalton finished; his cousin, Rory English, didn't. I finished, two years after that conversation in the black Ford Focus; Brendan obviously didn't. Seamus eventually went to University College Cork and got a degree; he serves as his own contrast, the one who had to miss the first rung to realise that his laces were tied.

Brendan is the only son of a farmer. He doesn't need a degree; he knows where his life is going. So he paid for two years in Waterford and never attempted to pass because Goldfields had nothing to offer him. The village never told us in words, but in atmosphere, that we needed to be somewhere else, anywhere else, for our young adulthood.

The problem isn't exclusive to Goldfields; 193,200 people aged between fifteen and

twenty-four emigrated from Ireland between 2009, the year after the recession hit, and 2014[4]. I saw them leave and saw them come back; Robbie Power couldn't hack Australia and returned within months, the same thing happened to a village lad that everyone just calls The Claw. Marc Ó Cúnasa hasn't come back from Sydney and was recently joined by his brother, Myles. After college, Conor Dalton followed his sister Saoirse to Brussels and then went onto Montreal, which he left after a week to return to Goldfields. He's back in Brussels now and Saoirse is back in Goldfields. Their cousin James came back after years down under, he had considered taking Australian citizenship but that plan was nixed by his refusal to swear allegiance to the British Queen. Naoise, wanting to avoid starting the life as a primary school teacher that his Arts degree had set him up for, applied for a Fulbright Scholarship on a whim and spent a year in Montana. Having found a calling in his work promoting hurling in America, he was desperate to spend a second year there, and managed to do so by convincing University College Cork to allow him to do an MPhil on the Irish in Montana. Now that he's home, he complains that there's nothing to do and no jobs to get, and he's right. Brendan went to college for the same reason Naoise went back to Montana: to avoid the tedium that comes with working somewhere like the grim-looking cheese factory down on Bohergloss in Goldfields. Youth unemployment in Ireland reached an all-time high of 31.1% in June 2012[5], the month I sat my Leaving Cert exams and turned eighteen. My first paying job came two years later, on foreign soil, in McBride's Irish Pub in Paris. Don't tell, Ian, the manager, that it was my first job though; my CV said that I had worked in Larry's Pub in Goldfields. I did pour a pint there once, when Larry's son, Brick, taught me and Seamus how to pour pints so we could apply for jobs in Kilkenny City and say that we had bar experience.

Farmers don't retire; my 87-year-old grandfather is testament to that. Brendan knows that, having seen his uncle Dan die childless and alone, leaving all of the Lennon land to his brother, Brendan's father, Jack. Given that Jack is in his mid-fifties, there is no rush for Brendan to become a full-time worker on the farm, hence the sojourn to Waterford and his working part-time with a vet in Kilkenny City now. I think, whether or not he knows this, Brendan sensed that beginning full-time work on the farm would have signalled an ending in his life; the same way teaching in a primary school would have closed a chapter in Naoise's. They both would have been where they were going to be for the rest of their working lives, and I don't think that either of them had it in them to stare down the barrel of a gun for such an extended period of time. Perhaps I felt the same when I decided to apply for a

Masters in England. Maybe there was something in me that saw my university classmates setting up jobs in *The Irish Times* and *Irish Independent* after graduating from our BA in Journalism that told me to run.

So I planned to run to England and when I moved out of my house in Dublin, I had three days at home in Goldfields before leaving. I was going to visit my grandparents' grave before I left, but abandoned the idea because I thought it sounded like something that would be done in an American teen drama and not in Goldfields. Instead, I ended up having cans in my friend Raggy John's garage and going to Kilkenny City on the Saturday night, spending the Sunday hungover and driving to Dublin on the Monday to go out again and say goodbye to some college friends.

In a way, it was fitting that I didn't visit the grave, since I never got to say goodbye to either of my grandparents while they were alive. My grandfather died before I was born and my grandmother, Nanny, died suddenly in her sleep when I was twelve. Other than some dodgy hips that would be expected of a woman who was eighty-six years of age, Nanny showed no signs of ill health during the day before she died, joining the family for my sister Sadb's fourteenth birthday celebrations. Still, she must have known that something was wrong; she wasn't a religious person in any sense, but went to bed that night with a crucifix in between her hands.

It's always seemed to me that you could trace character traits in people back to their elder relatives; Nanny's personality most likely shaped Sadb's, Naoise's and my own social shortcomings. All three of us prefer to keep small groups of friends and are instinctively distrusting of new people. Almost every one of my memories of Nanny takes place in her house on Goldfields's Moate Road, because the only times I can think of her not being there are every Sunday when she went shopping with my aunt Meadb or when she went on her annual summer trip to Kerry with Ann, another aunt. Nanny was something of a shut-in from the world post-Granda, we were her messengers and her newsagents; she got most of what she knew about the outside from us. Had it not been for the occasional visit of the parish priest, I think she would have limited herself to strictly familial relations. I don't think she saw the point of any other relationships in her old age.

Pointlessness seems to have been the recurring theme of life in Goldfields. Those of us who finished college did it because we didn't know what else to do. If it delayed the onset of real life, then it was worth the ever-rising fees and the lies I told to my parents about the failed module in first year. I told them that it was technically marked incomplete, but left out that it was incomplete because I had skipped the lecture the day of a pop quiz, preferring to watch *Yu-Gi-Oh* in the apartment in Ballymun with my roommate Patrick.

But what are we to do in this vacuum of austerity and cheese factories? It seems that every Irish generation in this post-independence state has been defined by whether or not they grew up in the midst of a recession. So, the lost young adults of the eighties got rich and had babies in the nineties, only for those babies to come of age in a mess that their parents should have seen coming that left them to drift around the globe, to Paris, to Montana, to Australia, or even to Waterford, in search of employment. In Ireland, we get a new batch of bastards of young every twenty years. At least this generation can apply for our American and Australian visas on the Internet, I suppose.

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[1] All dialogue is based on the author's recollection and not to be taken as verbatim

[2] Irish school-leaving exams

[3] Irish sport, taken especially seriously in Co. Kilkenny, where Goldfields is.

[4] Kenny, Ciara. "Emigration of Irish nationals falls 20% in year to April", *The Irish Times*, August 24, 2014. Last accessed on May 3, 2016 at:
<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/emigration-of-irish-nationals-falls-20-in-year-to-april-1.1908275>

[5] Ireland Youth Unemployment Rate, 1983-2016. Last accessed May 4, 2016 at:
<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ireland/youth-unemployment-rate>

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