

HISTORY

Ardmore

I am told that nowadays it is vacant, that swallows drive through the broken windows of the laundry-room. But again in my memory I am back at the hotel on the Cliffside, looking across the expanse of the sea to Mine Head. The district of Ring and Helvick is around the corner from the headland. Though I have never been over there I know that; the patrons at the hotel long ago told me so. The men of Anglo Irish descent and the merchant sons of Cork and solicitors of Carrick-on-Suir, the ones who holidayed here and spent much time gazing out to sea from the barroom window, they told me, old salts. I am back and walk the corridors and bedrooms, look on the sea through the windows that fog over some days and bear a permanent glaze from the salt spray. I am back in 1966, the year England won the World Cup, the summer I took the leaving cert, when I worked here in the hotel. For three pounds a week I was potboy and general dogs-body and then when the barmaid Miss Merry ran home to Mallow out of homesickness, I was put behind the bar, smartened up and my weekly pay was raised by two pounds to five. Miss C, the manageress, was the lady who smartened me. In the same way, she kept her female staff shipshape. She wore corsets, glasses with film-star frames, smoked Craven A cigarettes and had diabetes. She jabbed her insulin-filled hypodermic through her corsets and into her rump, unblinking, while at the same time telling her staff to eat less, to take care of their shapes, or they would grow into fat lumps. I think she may have been the reason for the homesickness of Miss Merry who liked a few glasses of pale in the afternoon.

I am now again in the gardens. They are overgrown; I am told they have been neglected for some time. Then they were tea gardens. Through the gardens I walk: Frank and I are taking the bottles to be dumped. I don't remember who once tended those pleasure gardens with a scent of rose, of fuschia and flock; I push my wheelbarrow of empties along the mazy pathway that leads to the cliffs.

And here is Frank, who owned the hotel. Who educated me, callow at eighteen, too young to know my Medoc from my Margaux. Who plucked me from the heart of the buttermilk countryside and landed me in the sophisticated Ardmore. Who instructed me to the wines of Bordeaux, the wines of Burgundy and of High Germany. There were no new age wines, no wines out of anywhere else. From Frank – leather soles shoes, tweed suit, white shirt, tweed tie. I learned all about wine.

You had to be good on wine in Ardmore in 1966; The Claude Cockburns, the William Trevors, the Molly Keanes dined here in the evenings; the musical Fleischmann's, the Dwyers of Montenotte, the remnants of the East India Company who settled here and whose names are now fading off the limestone headstones in the cemetery behind St Declan's Tower; The Beresford-Poers; the Jameson-Chaplins, the Fitzgeralds, the Sir John Keanes. You didn't give them Red with fish; you gave them German hock. You let St Emilion breathe: Beaujolais you popped and poured fresh. Ardmore, where G and T was grace before meals.

You had to know your wines, but then when all the goodness had been drained from the bottles, you had to know how to dispose of the empties. On the cliff that drops below St Declan's well where on Pattern dry came thousands, there Frank gave me lessons on disposal...

You must break them. Frank with venom would let a bottle fly, clenching the briar pipe between his teeth. Smash them between his teeth. Smash them against the far cliff. And, while seagulls dodged out of shot, he would go; smash. Now, you try. My throw would fall short and the bottle would fall into the ocean and float down there in a swell. Again he would show me; It's in the swing of the arm – Frank had thrown the discus

at school and now was my athletic coach. It was in the days before bottle banks, also before physiotherapy: Frank may have needed that too, but was able to take it out on me and the bottles. And I watched his braces strain beneath his tweeds with his exertions....

How many empty bottles bearing the labels of Courvoisier, and Chablis and Cork Dry Gin, how many squat bottles, tall bottles, square bottles, did I allow to sail into the seven seas from the breaker's yard of Ardmore in 1966?

Oftentimes I think back on Ardmore and my first employer, Frank. The Muscular wine expert; my first staff officer, martinet Miss C of the hypodermic jabs; my first work colleagues, the housemaids, waitresses, the local boy Gerald who took over as potboy when I was promoted and who ran around tables and beds after the girls until one day Frank clop clopped along on his leather soles and caught him; the chef who came home from England each summer and carried on outrageously camp but yet did a steady line with the elderly head waitress, his summer belle, Nan. And some nights we were all seen in Redbarn ballroom outside Youghal: Watneys Red barrel Ale, Nan and Chef dancing to an old time waltz.

Again in my memory, I said at the outset. It is because each time I see a bottle bobbing on a tarry sea, off the coasts of the Atlantic, the Irish Sea, the North Sea or East Australia, Ardmore comes back to me. The bottles that sail in on the tide and ebb out again. The bubbles of my mind, bobbing, bobbing on the vastness of the ocean, disconnected messages attempting to come together, out of my origins, out of the foreshore on which they were launched, attempting to make one coherent statement.