

THE BIG FELLAH

For me there were three giants - Parnell, Connolly and Collins. One of my yardsticks was the measure of disapproval in the Old Man's voice - Parnell for his sexual impropriety, Connolly for his socialism and Collins "because he turned." All three were practical men who died tragically, without fulfilling their promise. I suppose that says as much about me as about them.

The boy in short pants idolized Collins, in particular. This caused no end of pain to the Old Man who was staunchly Anti-Treaty. On our trips to the Abbey Cinema, we would refight old battles, until he would finally silence me with the hated - "you'll understand when you grow up!"

He was right, but I would still be seething as John Wayne galloped into the sunset or Audie Murphy decimated another division of Germans. With time, my views did change, but never my fascination with Collins. He metamorphosed from a cardboard, juvenile idol into a flawed man of destiny. And yet, I couldn't nail him as I felt I did Parnell and Connolly.

Then last August, we were driving through West Cork and stayed overnight in Clonakilty. There is still something wild and unfulfilled about that country. For all the "modern" bungalows that scar the hills, the old Ireland is ever-present. This is Collins country, mad and impracticable, pragmatic and sensible.

However, there is little enough of him at the museum in the humble school-house he once attended. But there are heartbreaking letters from young Anti-Treaty volunteers on the eve of their execution. Letters that still reek of youth, idealism and an ineffable beauty. Some were friends and neighbors who followed him into the resistance and later fought against him over a matter of principle.

We drove in silence to his birthplace. Nothing stood but a few old walls. The wind rustled the surrounding trees and I listened to a babbling English tourist explain to his silent Irish cousins how Collins had "absolutely no connection" to the current IRA. And then suddenly in that West Cork morning, the song was there for the taking.

The Old Man is dead many's the year and so is his Ireland. He's better off out of it. He wouldn't care for the new "olé olé" version. I'm not even sure if he'd like "Big Fella", but I'd give anything for him to hear it and to thank him for all our arguments, as we walked, hand in hand, up George's Street to the Abbey Cinema.