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Irish Daily Mail

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# INSIDE SATURDAY'S Irish Daily Mail

# Dr Mark Dooley



## MORAL MATTERS

# My boyhood memories of a royal visit

**T**OMORROW I fly to Montreal to address a conference at McGill University. Regular readers will know I don't like flying. It may be the safest form of travel, but it is also the most unnatural.

Having children has undoubtedly deepened my fear of flying. For days before my departure, I suffer separation anxiety. The prospect of leaving my family behind, of not being there to care for them, takes its toll.

It wasn't always so. Before getting married I used to criss-cross the globe without a care. In fact, I took my first flight at the age of seven – and I did so alone.

Dressed in my First Holy Communion suit, I travelled to Dublin Airport with my parents. The airport looked very different in the late Seventies.

What struck this young boy was the glamour of the air hostesses. It was in the company of one elegant hostess that I bid farewell to my parents. I was off to spend the summer with my father's mother in Coventry.

Boarding the plane, I realised I didn't want to leave. It was too late. In those days, there was no such thing as waiting in line for the runway. The doors closed and, within minutes, you were airborne.

The hostess held my hand as we climbed to cruising altitude. I was nauseous and petrified. However, I can still remember looking into her eyes and thinking: 'Everything is going to be okay.'

Before I knew it, we were on the ground. The hostess led me from the plane to meet my grandmother. Her job was done and I could see she was relieved.

Queen Elizabeth II was in Coventry that day. The city had been bombed to smithereens by the Nazis. Now it was a modernist nightmare. The homely streets of old England, streets which spoke of settlement, had been vandalised by vacant roads and ugly housing estates.

Even as a child, I knew people were not meant to live like that.

That said, nothing could dampen the excitement that surrounded the queen's visit.

She was in Coventry as part of the celebrations to mark her silver jubilee of 25 years on the throne. In covering their desecrated city with flags and bunting, it was as if the people were telling the monarch that she was their true leader.

I had never seen such a joyous outpouring of patriotism. Still, even at that tender age, I knew I had to stay silent. In those days, having an Irish

accent was not something you boasted about in Britain.

My grandmother lived with her sister in a Victorian terrace. Quietness filled every room, interrupted only by the chimes of a grandfather clock. I had flown into a world of old-fashioned decencies, of sensibilities shaped by war-time suffering.

At first, I wanted to go home. I could not envisage spending a summer with two old ladies in such solitude. 'You can go home tomorrow,' said my grandmother, 'but not before I read you the story of Mr Bump.'

That night in Coventry I fell in love with the Mr Men series of books by Roger Hargreaves, a love affair that has continued to this day. As I now read those books to my own children, I often recall getting up and telling my grandmother I had decided to stay. 'Good,' she replied, 'because Mr Tickle is just about to start on TV.'

Later that day, we went to see a remake of King Kong in a local cinema. My grand aunt, who dressed in plaid and adored fine china, looked distinctly out of place. 'Three tickets to Hong Kong,' she said, causing the ticket seller to silently convulse.

**W**HAT I remember most, however, was the gentle pace of life and the civility of all those I met in Coventry. I recall waking each morning to the soothing sound of Terry Wogan on radio. In the evening, after a light tea on fine china, my aunt would listen to the 'wireless', while my grandmother would settle down to watch Crossroads.

Irish showjumper Eddie Macken was a superstar back then, and for the Irish living in England he was something of a hero. This meant spending Saturday viewing World Of Sport presented by Dickie Davis. For a country with such a rich sporting legacy, it was a revelation to see them opt for wrestling over cricket or soccer. Yet nothing thrilled them more than watching Big Daddy flatten Giant Haystacks each Saturday.

And then, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, I was back in my Communion suit and off again to the airport. I wept as my grandmother handed me to the hostess, her caring eyes no less reassuring than before. However much I feared flying, those wonderful months spent in Coventry were well worth it.

I am quite sure I will say the same upon my return from Montreal. In the meantime, I must once again face my fears of flying all alone. After all, the only hands I now wish to hold are those back here at home.

mark.dooley@dailymail.ie



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