

## Introduction

**F**rom her earliest childhood, Maeve loved stories – and wanted to be part of them. When her father started to read her some tale of two children wandering through a wood, she asked at once, ‘Where was I?’

He would say patiently, ‘You were sitting in a tree beside the path.’ And with Maeve happily located, the story could go on.

When she grew up and became a storyteller herself, she made her readers feel that, like little Maeve in the tree, they were on the scene, among the action and the characters. She did the same in her journalism, writing with on-the-spot directness of the people and events she met with.

It was her father’s enthusiasm that led to Maeve becoming a journalist in the first place. As a teacher she used her long holidays to travel all over the world, on cargo ships, cheap flights, trains and hitch-hiking. She worked in school and holiday camps, on a kibbutz, and as a tourist guide, in North America, the Middle East and Asia.

Her father sent some of her long, lively letters home to the newspapers, who published them as articles. That was the start of her career as a columnist – a job she kept doing happily even after she had become a celebrated novelist.

Whether she was observing a couple having an angry but icily polite disagreement, or feeling the panic – including her own – brought on by the trials of air travel, or watching the outlandish

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fantasies of the fashion industry, she had a unique eye and ear for the quirks, intensities and absurdities of human behaviour.

No wonder her readers were delighted with her – for she told it all with the eagerness and enthusiasm of someone who says, ‘Just wait till I tell you what happened ....’ and goes on to tell an enthralling and often hilarious tale.

She brought the same directness to her many serious reports for the paper – on the bombs in London and other cities, the capsized ferry disaster, and the savage war in Cyprus.

Maeve followed the advice she often gave to aspiring writers – to write as you speak. Her view of the world and the people in it was the same in her writing as it was in her life: she was compassionate and perceptive, she treated everyone with the same considerate interest, and her humour was uproarious but never sneering or cruel.

Her capacity for friendship seemed limitless, and hundreds of people from all over the world, who never knew her, have written to say that they thought of her as a friend.

I can almost hear her say, ‘That’s enough of that! You make me sound like some kind of saint!’ Indeed as a schoolgirl, sainthood was a role she considered aiming for, but decided against – partly on the grounds that it could involve martyrdom, but really because it just wasn’t her style.

We must all be glad she took on the roles she did, as teacher, writer, and friend to so many – and I above all feel specially lucky that we met, and spent so many happy and loving years together.

When I read these articles, stories and reports from *The Irish Times*, I hear her voice and feel she is back with us again, in all the vivacious joy she created around her. In these words, and in her many novels, short stories, plays and films, Maeve lives on – and always will.

*Gordon Snell, June 2013*

**SIXTIES**

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## School Outing

*29 October 1964*

Oddly enough, the horror of a school outing is not the responsibility of looking after other people's children in alien surroundings, nor is it the noise and possibility of them getting out of hand. The real problem is wondering whether they are going to be bored. The outing is so eagerly anticipated, and so much discussed, that it has to be an anti-climax – unless there are a few unexpected delights, like a teacher getting stuck in a hedge, or half of the sixth years being left behind in a chip shop, or someone getting involved with a man.

Of course, the real disaster is collecting the money. How often have I collected 38 times 18s. and spent it three times over before the day came when the man in CIÉ had to be paid?

Then there is the likelihood of someone getting sick; far from being able to minister to such unfortunates, I start to get sick myself, which undoubtedly heightens the awfulness for everyone involved. In all the years of hot bus journeys and twisty bends on the roads, and 12-year-olds eating four pounds of sweets in between bags of chips and bottles of Coca-Cola, no one has ever gotten sick, but I can never believe my luck will hold.

We went to Wales recently and to date this was by far the best outing. From the children's point of view it was going to a foreign country – there would be Customs and foot-and-mouth spray on the way home. There would be new, strange Woolworths to

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investigate, there was a chance to see both the mail boat and the ferry, since we went out by the former and came home by the latter. They could even send postcards to people saying 'spending a little while in Wales' without elaborating that the little while was five hours. There was also Caernarfon Castle, the *raison d'être* of the whole visit, but no one gave that much thought.

From a teacher's point of view, it also had everything to recommend it. It didn't leave at a ridiculous hour in the morning; in fact we only left Dún Laoghaire at eleven-thirty a.m. Once you got them on the boat there was really nothing that could happen to them except the obvious and if that did happen someone would be bound to notice and stop the ship. Exploring the boat took most of the first hour, settling on a place for the mammoth eating of sandwiches brought us up to about two o'clock. Then there was an hour of everyone rubbing themselves with Nivea cream. After this the Welsh coast was sighted and approved of, and we got on to land and into a bus in a matter of minutes.

The bus is a must. Firstly there is nothing whatsoever to do in Holyhead, and if you just bring them out to Bangor to swim there is all that nightmare of counting them the whole time. Anyway, if they spend the day on a beach, someone is bound to say that they should have saved the 37s. and gone to Dollymount. But the bus is very cunning indeed, and anyway, if you have a soul at all, you would want them to see Caernarfon and this is not really feasible without your own bus.

The bus driver was called Fred. He looked as if he might be offended if the children sang in the bus, so I hoped they wouldn't, but I didn't like to forbid it because that sort of singing is all part of the Outing anyway. However, they were quite sensitive about the whole thing, and every time he pointed out an RAF camp, or rock climbers on the mountains, they would pause respectfully in

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the middle of some terrible song about 'I'm the son of the Hickory Hollow tramp' and listen with interest.

There was enormous and unfeigned interest in the village with the longest name in the world. Pencils and notebooks were out and the bus had to stay beside the signpost until everyone copied down Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch.

Fred, because he could not only spell it, but could also pronounce it, became the hero of the hour.

We only had an hour-and-a-quarter in Caernarfon, so my dissertation from the battlements had to be shorter than I would have liked. But I could see that the lure of the foreign Woolworths and the alien sweets would outweigh too much chat about Edward I and the Welsh Barons, and the one thing you do realise as a teacher is your limitations.

A horror story of the previous week – when apparently a Dublin boys' school had missed the boat home because the bus arrived back too late – so impressed me that I encouraged Fred to speed through the setting sun back to Holyhead; we may have had to forego a few slate quarries on the way, but not even a diamond mine would have seemed worth the risk of having to sleep in a bus with forty schoolgirls and face their parents the next day.

From motives of economy we had an enormous and unlady-like feed of fish and chips in a Holyhead café, then, fragrant with vinegar, we got onto the ferry. The children went out on deck, I went to the bar. Later a deputation came in with faces of doom.

'You're wanted on deck, Miss Binchy,' they announced to the whole bar, and everyone assumed it was probably by the police. I assumed, with even greater fear and certainty, that someone had been sick. In fact, it was only to settle an argument about the Wicklow mountains, which had just come purplishly into view.

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For 37s. each (only 18s. 6d. for everyone under 15) plus a sum of £11 for the hire of Fred and his bus, it was a marvellous day. The trouble is, it went so successfully that they are now talking confidently in terms of a trip to France.

## Just Plane Bores

*13 September 1968*

**T**he dangers of getting stuck with a bore in a plane considerably outweigh the other hazards of plane travel. There is no comforting insurance policy against this, however, for what actuary could possibly relate the risks to any practical premium?

I often hear people saying that they sat beside a frightfully interesting chap on a plane, but I just don't believe it. The only people I sit beside are people who read the safety regulations with an intensity that could only come from certainty of disaster. One woman even asked my advice when she came to the bit about removing false teeth during a forced landing.

'Do you think I should take out my crown filling?' she asked me anxiously.

Sometimes, I must admit, I escape these relatively harmless people and I sit beside know-alls, people who wince when the engine sounds change, people who have known better lines, faster jets, classier meals and more certain likelihood of reaching one's destination.

I never met anyone remotely interesting in a plane but I have seen interesting people. I sat behind Kirk Douglas once, and I sat across the aisle from a couple who had the most terrible argument



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that ended in their throwing drinks at each other and me. I heard a girl complain to the hostess on a flight to New York that Aer Lingus must have lost all sense of shame to let men and women use the same toilets. I was once on a plane where I was the only passenger and sat in a Kafkaesque silence surrounded by empty seats. Risk of boredom at the hands of a passenger was minimal certainly, but it's not usually practical to fly solo, so most of us are stuck with the plane bores for all our flying years.

People have a habit of confiding terrible secrets in planes. They tell things that would in a less rarefied atmosphere remain much more wisely unsaid. A man who told me that he was smuggling 15 watches made me so nervous that I was the one blushing, stammering and hesitating at the airport, and was eventually and very reasonably searched after the performance, while the smuggler ticked his way unconcernedly to the airport bus.

The last time I was coming back from Israel my neighbour sobbed the whole way from Tel Aviv to London, choking out explanations about how badly she had behaved all the summer; she'd never broken the Sabbath she said until she went to Israel, she'd always eaten kosher until she went to Jerusalem. The irony of it. She wept, and I nearly wept with her, but of course when we got to London Airport she had recovered and I was the one who couldn't bear to meet her father's eye as he stood there with his long black beard, he who'd always kept the Sabbath and eaten kosher all his life.

If people are not telling you about their operations, their bank balances, the highly unsatisfactory state of their marriages or how they were cheated by hoteliers, travel agents and the entire population of whatever country you happen to be leaving, then they are inclined to interrogate you about the most intimate details of your life.

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‘How can a schoolteacher afford to go to Hong Kong for the summer holidays?’ rasped a terrible Australian, who was going to be my neighbour for the next 20 hours.

There is no fully satisfactory answer to a question like that, and as I was already afraid that my bank manager could well be waiting on the tarmac in Dublin with the same words on his lips, I couldn’t say anything convincing in reply. The Aussie became sour at my refusal to be frank and began a tirade against all Europeans, who were a miserable bankrupt lot altogether – he had no further fodder for this in my uncalled-for explorations.

Europeans always sneered at Australians, he went on, they thought Australians had nothing but beer and going to the beach and sheep stations – he went on, and on, and on. Singapore, Calcutta, Beirut, Vienna – all came and went and we were still talking about the outback and the Aborigines. We were making maps on our plastic trays of food and letting the ice cream be Queensland and the salt be Perth. We nearly came to blows about the hors d’oeuvres. I said it should be Adelaide, he said it was Melbourne and since it was his continent, I let it be Melbourne. But the whole journey was exhausting and I thought longingly of the wonderful journey out which took five weeks, and there was an adventure every single day and nearly 600 people on the ship.

Shortly after this marathon flight I decided that the fault was certainly mine. No one else seemed to have such bad luck and when I read Helen Gurley Brown’s book *Sex and the Single Girl* I knew it must be my fault. Planes, she said, are wonderful places for picking up Grade A men. The more international and exciting the flight, the better your chances would be. I had an unworthy suspicion that even the vibrant H.G. Brown would not have made much of old Waltzing Matilda and his White Australia policy, his wallabies and his test match. However, I decided to follow her instructions on the very next flight.

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According to *Sex and the Single Girl*, you should get a seat fairly near the front of the plane (if that's how you get into the plane; presumably if it's one of the ones where you climb in through the tail, you should sit near the back). Then leave a great big handbag on the seat beside you. At the approach of other women or Grade Z men you leave the bag there, but when a Grade A man approaches you whip the bag from the seat and stare straight ahead.

Once the Grade A man is installed you must establish contact by fumbling over your safety belt and the intention is to entangle yourself and the man in a knot from which with much tinkling laughter you both extricate yourselves, and such splendid rapport having been made he offers you a refined cocktail once you are airborne, and things progress from there.

I'll say this for *S and the SG*, the beginning part works like a dream. A man like Marlon Brando sat down beside me; the belt business was a fiasco because he started to fumble with his belt at the same time, and whatever way we seemed to do it we had to call the air hostess to disentangle us from the muddle. She took so long that I thought she was going to send for an acetylene torch. Anyway calm was restored and we were airborne. All around us people were clicking cigarette lighters and ordering refined cocktails, but the false Marlon Brando was staring straight ahead. It turned out that he was absolutely terrified of flying; all that business about the safety belt was the last straw and he seemed on the verge of having a very loud and serious fit. Determined to avoid this at all costs, I bought him a Scotch, the worst possible thing I should have done apparently, but it calmed him and he went to sleep almost at once on my shoulder.

Now the journey from London to Gibraltar is very short, and although it is undoubtedly good for the morale to have a handsome man asleep in my arms – I smiled pityingly at all the people who

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passed by, who had no man at all – it did present grave problems when we got to the Rock. He just wouldn't wake up. One of the hostesses thought he was dead but the other said he was just unconscious so I had to stay around for what was going to be either a revival or an inquest. I missed my bus to Malaga, I had to deal with Marlon Brando's business partner who fortunately came to collect him, there was much face slapping, and 'wake up Pete old man'. Nobody believed me when I said he was afraid of flying but everyone agreed that to feed a highly strung man like Pete Scotch whiskey was a most foolish and suspect course of action.

So whenever I hear about the excitement and glamour of air travel I'm inclined to be a little cynical and I look forward to the day when we'll have either single rows of seats, or compulsory films that must be watched in silence by the whole plane load, or better still, the sort of club car, Pullman lounges that you see in American films, where you can talk to everyone. Until then, we'll just continue to belt ourselves in two by two or three by three and bore each other to death at altitudes of thousands of feet, flying hundreds of miles an hour all round the world.

### **But Does Anybody Care?**

*1 January 1969*

**P**erhaps it matters to you that Hull is 226 miles from Brighton and that there are 40 poles (or perches) to the rood. I feel that if you had started out on the road to Hull you'd have a roadmap or the signposts anyway, and if for some extraordinary reason you were lying down on the ground measuring things in roods and perches, it would all be written on the measuring tape.