



## Early doors in the Local

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On a fair day, when the traffic leaving the congested centre of Ireland's capital runs free, the 65B bus to Tallaght will take just shy of an hour. It can pass as quickly as a glance through a paper or feel like a lifetime – long enough to think through what a lifetime's worth, passing as it does, as it always does, along the Rathmines Road, Rathgar Road and on through Terenure, Templeogue and the chain of districts that stretch, from the south side of the city, on out to the foot of the Wicklow Mountains. As the rain comes and some roll tobacco ahead of leaving, you may be minded to cuff the window clear of condensation and check on progress. You'd make out familiar shapes...the Spars, salons, funeral services. You'd notice peat briquettes set for lifting, Guinness and Harp signs like beacons and those routine calls to salvation that, even now, never seem more than a short walk in every Parish. Eventually, the streets will give way to acres of housing and carriageways that drop off near the Square, that pyramid-framed, misnamed cathedral to bargains, opened by Gay Byrne in 1990. With little need for shopping, you might start willing yourself on in traffic that shunts forward at each light...but then your breathing will ease as the bus quickens, down un-named roads, past industrial units and any ambushes that kids, primed behind tree-veiled fences, might spring, towards Cushlawn Park. Gathering yourself from your seat, the momentum will sway you round the corner with the whitewashed walls and you'd be forgiven for leading your thoughts astray, when you see the Killinarden House pub and the briefest sight of the early doors regulars stepping inside.

The first early evening that Pete Smyth walked into the Killinarden House in 1988, not long after he and his family had relocated, like so many others, from inner Dublin, the bar was almost empty. Once settled, he noticed a man sat at a booth in the far corner, wearing a crash helmet and sipping a Guinness. A hammer was set on the table, in anticipation of a conversation that, it seemed, had started with someone in the days before but had yet to be concluded. From a small village of around 2,500 people in the 1960s, Tallaght had become the largest town in South Dublin and sat amongst the largest housing settlements in Europe. After a sustained development programme that began in the 1970s and reached over 76,000 in the early teens of this century, it would hardly be without the flashpoints and tensions that attend such populations -and the promise of industry and better to come can easily fall flat. Yet beyond these uncertainties - the buoyant peaks and violent troughs that, on occasion, make the town worthy of more national news, Tallaght remains home to the pulse of a working community, strong enough to navigate their own lives - in spite of living on what Pete once referred to, wryly but convincingly, as *a reservation*. Trust can count urgently here, familiarity too. How different is it for someone to photograph their neighbours – sharing, as they do, the routines, dramas and celebrations, the lending and returning... even the dangers that afflict estates at the edge of our cities? But maybe you're only at the edge if you bow to the centre -and nobody seems to bow in Tallaght. So what changes? Pete Smyth speaks of his working process being interrupted, slow and sometimes even dormant. It's an approach that draws on the obligations in his own life, making a living, caring for a family and facing the challenges life and death brings that would break many and ache in us all.

The photographs first collected as *A View from the Dearth* in 1992, were amongst the earliest photographs Pete Smyth made in Tallaght. Made over many months, in accordance with friendships, the photographer arrived at their homes to ask subjects to sit formally in their front rooms. Looking at these photographs is to avail of privileged invitations. We're taken inside. Each photograph is cross-lit and depends on a window light softly returned by a method the photographer would draw on at each calling. They are an account of neighbours removed for a short while from the wider day and all that may hold. Ambrose Shields and his wife sit at the back and edge of the frame, whilst six young children dominate in patterned jerseys, leaning into, onto and next to a table empty of food, ornament or distraction. A painting above them shows a rural scene, an *idyll*, somewhere else beyond Tallaght. In another home, the Crowley family are set in a stillness that belies the century of the photograph's making and, in a rare exterior scene, the McMahon's stand against a white stippled wall as a trinity of relatives. Elsewhere, Margaret Clarke sits alone in a plain room.

She wears two jumpers underneath a dark coat. Perhaps the warmth of their material will hold the chill at bay before an evening fire is lit. Pete Smyth's photographs are made with mutual cooperation and the immersed nattering of shared histories. Like Jimmy Forsyth's photographs, made in Newcastle over forty years before, or the more recently lauded Denis Dineen archive, there's an unhindered openness in the faces he records, in their gentle will to play their part. They know him, care for him and that changes something -that can change *everything*. It's an accord rarely achieved in photography -though many strive for parity, it's a rare thing for a photographer to be helplessly, unavoidably part of the same world.

When he talks about these things, though he rarely does, Pete Smyth will say that what others take from his work can differ considerably from his own intentions. Tallaght might be seen as a ready symbol of the difficulties experienced in the polarised region County Dublin has now become - but these are people, not illustrations to serve other agendas and Pete Smyth is sensitive to how Tallaght ticks, how it's contained and lessened by the discord that inevitably arises from time to time...But to dwell on that alone would be to underplay the richness he recognises - a little like John Berger, perhaps, who cautioned against readings of Fasanella's paintings as simply the depiction of tragic lives. Berger suggested tragedy might be a condition awarded by those free of the obligation to live their lives in that way - those who ultimately enjoy 'a compassionate leave'. Pete Smyth has taken no such leave and knows lives are built of more than tragedy, though it will always play its part.

...and there it is again, that tension in photography between work that exploits -for all its attempts at conveying experience- and work that transcends, to become something we can *believe*. Pete Smyth's work sits with the latter, in a list with few parallels, but it comes from association and that rare integration between living and working that many aspire to but few really get close to. To work through Pete's archive would be to reach something of the conditions of modern Ireland for those at the periphery. Achieved over decades, it's a varied collection and includes work with some whose very existence can seem a test. Away from Dublin City's spiralling real estate prices, for example, he regularly worked with groups who couldn't help but encounter the quiet inequities that remain in Ireland. Nearby, Travellers were being offered space on a Halting Site, as they were in Finglas, Clondalkin, and elsewhere on the outskirts. In two small publications that appeared in early, then mid 1990's, Pete Smyth made portraits, along with Richard Johnson and Gerard Swift, for a series of projects with Traveller women who made banners and used illustration to relate something of their lives untold. It's perhaps telling that, though a community fraught with what the photographer Alen Macweaney described as 'the appeal of poverty to the camera', the portraiture Smyth made is sparsely and beautifully removed from much of what has gone before. If Macweaney had made an earlier account that was as sensitized and reverential as it was slow to appear in print, Pete Smyth photographed Bridget Ward, Minnie Connors and their contemporaries as he would his neighbours. With wider living environments removed to leave only faces, the usual possessions photographers seem hungry to include were replaced by storytelling and a sense of lineage and mortality never more moving that when Alice Connors speaks of motherhood, of her 'eleven children living, but sixteen, had they all survived'...

As conversations deepened, the importance of home -in all its forms- would return. From a father's distant legacy in Tuam, Galway to more recent decisions to settle in the east of Ireland, most had found themselves remote from their adolescence. Listening to their experiences, as they sat in camps with few or no utilities, or on stippled estates similar to his own, Pete Smyth must have recognised the challenges described -of relocation, displacement and an adaption to patterns less fluent than those they'd shared in their untethered youth. Smyth himself had followed the Irish journeys made by so many before him, to find work in London in the 1960's, eventually working as a printer and returning to set up in business in Dublin in 1970. When asked about London in the 60's, he will only offer

that he couldn't remember much about it...and so that alone should be confirmation enough that he was probably there.

Pete Smyth's work seems to be forever at touching distance with the idea of belonging. Whilst some might use photography to campaign, for others, things are closer to home and each step taken is irredeemably entwined in the delicate navigation of urgencies nearby. We can feel this deeply. It's manifest in the brief series Smyth made by asking some of the young local people to dress in the sheets, adornments and war paint of a tribe he created in a way only he could have. Solemn and dignified, with any stifled laughter long exhausted, they are photographs of young people shaken by the threat of hostility and even extinction in a land under threat. With a nod to the imperfect histories that photography sometimes services, the work must surely have been inspired -or, better, *provoked*- by the travelling curiosity of Edward Curtis who, with a wagon of props at his side, would build an account of a Native American people as decorative and compelling as it was affected by intervention. By collaborating with his youthful neighbours, Smyth is sensitive enough to have known he was photographing a generation that, a few short years later would be at the heart of battles for survival when drug use and its consequences threatened to take hold in the area. It was a spell that would break apart families and lead to the kind of action and self-governance the people of Tallaght would soon be forced to conduct for themselves on a community-wide scale. As a portent of what was to come, Smyth's fictional tribe were *the people of the DPLIPHE*, (pronounced *dippa-lipée* and standing for Disadvantaged People Living In Peripheral Housing Estates). Aged by a platinum toning print treatment, the series held the young people reverentially, whilst perhaps foretelling their roles as the marginalised urban warriors and community activists that they and their elders would have little choice but to become.

Once lying fallow, the land those kids would roam between housing and commerce in Tallaght has transformed since the early 2000s. As the Luas tram line extended, Pete Smyth photographed the wider landscape and peripheral scenes it would be his routine to pass through. Set against his more recognised portraiture, they're almost surprising in their vacancy -but then we've come to realise it's possible to relate a place and its people through architecture alone, if the photographer was attuned enough to each. Pete knows this too. He recorded the emergence of glass walled office blocks and warehouses that have risen just beyond back gardens near his own. He reminds us of the faux majesty of the Square (-still a misnamed pyramid-shaped shopping centre), just visible at the rear of recently built industrial blocks. Neck-laced by foliage in several wider frames, he records the geometry of modern faith by photographing austere, concrete churches with their crosses like frail antennae tuned to the heavens. New slim pathways border work units, but despite neatly sewn groundwork, they seem unpopulated. Did the business withdraw before those saplings, still strapped to their guides, were able to establish themselves? In their diversity, each of Pete Smyth's photographs of wider Tallaght marks something sporadic and singular- as if they're the marking of desire lines, the inevitable and need-shaped crossing points made by residents who trace their own routes over months and years. From windows that seem disproportionately small in walls rendered against the Irish rain, from pathways that seem to double back on themselves to lead nowhere -these are photographs each primed by the local rhythms of walks to work, to the store, to the bar.

It would be over a quarter century after his first visit to the Killinarden House before Pete Smyth would walk into the same bar to a standing ovation, after the launch of his photographs at the Rua Red Gallery in April 2019. In some quarters, it might seem an overdue accolade -but that might be to imply he was waiting on the world to waken and, tucked into a booth at 'the Killy' (as he calls it), with a blue dusk deepening outside, those oversights rarely matter. There might be other things to deal with, matters of life and, well, everything else. Over time, Pete began to photograph in the bar. It would be surprising if he hadn't. An early raucous series made when Ireland found themselves in the later rounds of the World Cup drew on the euphoria that comes when a whole country forgets -for a few

hours at least- that there will be a tomorrow. The work comes together as a flow of faces, neighbours and relations who hug, smoke, scream and dance for the camera in one of those rare spells of communion when a win solves everything. It's been augmented over the years by spontaneous pictures taken during social sessions -incidental, occasional riffs on what's happening in the bar, made with the kind of tacit agreement only in place for someone well known.

I first took the bus journey to see Pete Smyth in Tallaght in the spring of 1993. He'd organised a small exhibition in the community centre, one of many activities he was at the heart of and which occasionally prompted invitations to blow-ins like me. After a long afternoon that would ultimately spread into days, we found ourselves in the bar next door, amongst souls who shared his interests in pictures, music and all those other tendencies that hold us tight while we find ways to deal with what the world throws at us. Beyond talk of Country music, the opera of the great unwashed and the hopeless quest to describe what a song can really do to you, talk turned to photographers who'd previously passed through Tallaght –what they were drawn to, were unnerved by and how someone may be bold enough to face New York, yet pass on an invitation to step into the Lounge bar of the Killy on pay day. Such is the distance between visitor and local, in what they see and what they feel, in what they assume and what they know. To stay awhile with men and women as they work through the falls and lifts that play out over years instead of days is a privilege. To sit in the slipstream between irreverence and lament, amongst those who share the belief that the bodhran drum is a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands, who wonder if George Jones spoke for us all when he drove to a bar on a lawnmower after Tammy hid the car keys... is acceptance -and to sit on, as the talk turns to concerns that prevail outside, is something to hold dear.

Pete Smyth once told me to never trust a man who dislikes country music. This is the man who can quote Hank Williams as he can Kavanagh – who, when accused of line dancing in his own front room, after a late night in the Killy, was adamant it didn't count as –and I admire the logic of this one- he was *on his own*. In truth, in an era awash with concepts and the profile-hungry, I suppose Pete Smyth *is* on his own - a figure in Irish photography, making work amongst those he shares his life with and at a pace in keeping with that life itself. It's a singular contribution few would sustain. These are not bold or angry photographs –those qualities can be brief and will pass like the rain. Instead, they're closer to a celebration of the way life works in a place he helps shape and one that's probably shaped him in the process...and these photographs matter -all of this matters, every face and pathway, each anniversary that brings release or reflection... and how lucky it is to be in such company, as we unravel and rethread life in the Killinarden -with the only distractions a country duo's sound-check and the shape of another 65B, gliding past in the twilight outside.