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Opening Extract from...

Maeve's Times

Selected Irish Times Writings

Written by Maeve Binchy

Edited by Róisín Ingle

Published by Orion Books

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Maeve Binchy

Maeve's Times

Selected *Irish Times* Writings

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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

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

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 Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch.

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.

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

The 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

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.

'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.

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

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

Perhaps 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.

Anyone going back to Oxford this month *knows* that the Hilary Term starts on January 19th and no one else will be at a disadvantage by not knowing; and since neither the March nor September eclipses of the sun will be visible from Greenwich, why torment us by telling us about them?

I must say that I find it very disagreeable indeed to open my diary on New Year's Day and find pages of advice about poisoning, shock and wounds. Choking, in particular, is very loathsome.

Would anyone remember 'to dislodge obstruction, bend head and shoulders forward and in case of small child, hold upside down then thump between shoulder blades' – just because the eye happened to light on this one day when looking for a telephone number?

The advice is not all that practical, either. Severe Case of Cramp usually sets in when you are standing in a bus, and you can't very well 'take hold of foot and turn toes firmly upward until spasm has passed'. And in the case of poisoning by mouth, how on earth are most people to neutralise acid poisoning by administering *chalk*?

This year's diary seems loath to leave any space at all for what I hope will be my own memorable activities, so full is it of ridiculous information. Sandwiched between the telephone number you should call in Upavon if you want the weather forecast and a useless page giving the equivalent American and Continental clothes sizings (but admitting sadly that it is always best to try on the article before buying it) there is a type of Bon Viveur guide to wine, compiled by the Wine and Food Society. Everything gets a mark from 0 to 7; 0 equals 'no good' and 7 'the best', it says simply. Apart from the interesting historical question it raises for the amateur – who must wonder whether it was drought or storms or strikes in the vineyard that made 1956 a poor starter – surely no one is going to take it seriously, and whip it out for consultation while the wine waiter hovers?

Then there is the page marked 'my car' with all kinds of spaces for numbers of boot key, of ignition key, of chassis and insurance policy. To my mind, the type of person who would fill all this in is also the type who keeps a leather-bound log book in the glove compartment with the same details lovingly inscribed. He probably calls the car 'she', and knows everything by heart anyway.

Yet into this whole field of bushels and pecks, centigrade and Fahrenheit, Lammas Day being August 1st and the sun rising at 9.05 a.m. next Saturday, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother being born on August 4th, 1900, and Ramadan facing us on November 22nd, has come a new challenge – the Special Interest diary. Not only the schoolboy, the businessman and the lady are catered for now, but a whole range of unlikely diarists from the filmgoer to the gardener, the photographer, the motorcyclist, the electrical engineer and the handyman.

It certainly seems more reasonable to gear a diary to someone's job or hobby than to assume that everyone in the world is going to be interested in the Golden Number, the Dominical Letters and the Epact, whatever the Epact may be. Last year it was nought, and this year they forgot it, thankfully, in my particular diary.

Still, the specialised diaries have problems of their own. Would you rather carry around pages of advice about planting and pruning, or handy hints on slapping crows' feet away from your eyes? You'll have to make up your mind whether you are a lady first or a gardening enthusiast, or else buy two diaries. Perhaps they might organise detachable pages of information and you could make up personal diaries for your friends out of all of them: for the golfer – businessman – Catholic – music radio ham, for example. It has endless possibilities.

The main idea of a diary, in case you have lost sight of it, is to provide some open space. From years of catastrophe with the page-

a-day ones, I've now settled for a week between two pages, so that Sunday is always on the top left-hand corner. In the excitement of all those empty pages you think that you can fill a page a day easily, but by January 11th the whole thing has become impractical. Pages glare at you in empty accusation, two pages stick together and you completely forget to do something that you'd written in in red ink – there are pitfalls all the way with the page-a-day kind, unless you are aged 14 and have something to say to yourself.

What *do* people write in diaries anyway? I remember seeing a television programme quite a long time ago, about children's diaries, and the kind of things they put in them. Apparently there was a relentless litany of 'Got up, got dressed, went to school', broken only by the triumphant but shaky hand of the mumps or measles victim: 'Didn't get up, didn't go to school.' They seemed to be obsessed with what the teachers wore; whether or not they liked them was quite immaterial to the interest in professional garb. Very few children's diaries carried on in February. I can never quite regard mine as just an appointment book, and I feel a terrible urge to put in happenings and comments. I know it is both foolish and dangerous, particularly for someone who loses a diary so regularly.

But after I discovered that in my indiscreet days I entered for Saturday, July 27th, 1963: 'This was one of the best days in my life,' and now I can't remember why, I thought that whatever the risk, names and places must be brought back again.

Actually, if you do put a bit of your life into your diary you are much more likely to get it back when you lose it than if you just list letters to write and how you spent your money. I'm sure it's not the fact that I have written 'Large financial reward for finder' on mine that makes people post it to me or ring me and arrange a personal delivery, because no one except an unpleasant schoolboy ever accepted the reward. I even telephoned the police in Pearse Street once to say

that I'd left it in a phone box in Westmoreland Street, and could they ever ask any Garda who was passing to look and see was it there? As if this was the most normal request for Gardaí in that area, they agreed and I collected it, red-faced, from the station next day.

I'd even thought of bringing my diary to the Income Tax Commission in support of an appeal if necessary, but it's probably just as well that it hasn't been, yet. Even though there is lots of evidence of legitimate spending that no one would have had the energy to fake, there are all the other things as well which might take from the seriousness of the situation.

So, like the man who made his money not out of the mustard eaten but by what people leave on their plates, diary publishers never really care whether or not we are faithful in our New Year's resolve to record the happenings of 1969. Until they invent diaries that come in shorter editions at more frequent intervals, they have nothing to worry about. While disclaiming any responsibility for errors, they can continue to blind us with information which we mentally note as certain to be useful while we leap through it, looking for the cheerful space about whom to notify in case of accident.