

Philip Davison

Foreign Places



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My father was an architect. He worked for the Department of Health. His brief was to modernize the state's Victorian asylums and aging hospital buildings. On occasion, he would take me with him on site visits where he would meet with senior management, medical staff and contractors to discuss their needs. I carried the roll of plans. These meetings involved drinking tea. I didn't like tea, but was required to drink it and answer any question put to me. It was only polite. Besides, there would be USA Assorted biscuits.

Going to an asylum was a quest. 'Will we see any?' I asked the first time.

'Any what?' my father inquired.

'You know...loonies.' My interest was genuine, if not clinical.

Instead of reproaching me for the use of the term, he replied: 'There are no loonies here, son.'

On the corridors we were approached several times by patients. With each encounter my dad stopped to talk. Whether or not these people grasped what it was he was doing, he described the renovations in detail. He assured them that the changes were very much for the better. He spoke with the ease all professionals of the day seemed to possess. I was treated as a boy architect and fielded questions accordingly.

There were other foreign adventures - trips to his office and drafting rooms in the Customs House, a visit to a retired colleague in a red-brick apartment block, an expedition to the house in Belfast where he had grown up, but the one I looked forward to most was a visit to his brother, my Uncle Sam, in Bangor, Co. Down.



Sammy was a bright-eyed dark-featured wiry wee mon with a taste for tobacco and rum. His lower jaw worked on a high-tension rubber band, which delivered rapid fire utterances that had a surprisingly soft edge. It was, nevertheless, foreign talk. I didn't catch much of what he said and had to rely on his tone, what had been established in the preceding few minutes, and what might be reasonably expected in the near future. His wife, my Aunt Lillian, was from Sheffield and spoke with a strong accent, but I readily understood what she was saying. She was a mischievous, irreverent, big-hearted woman with a quick, infectious laugh. She wore thick glasses with what seemed to be a wildly inappropriate prescription. They had her reading letters with the paper two inches from the lenses.

Who can say how much of Sam she comprehended? 'You what?' she would sing regularly and Sam would patiently repeat whatever it was he had just said.

'I shouldn't be here,' she complained to me without much rancour on one of her cigarette breaks on the cinder path at the back of the house. 'I should be back home in Sheffield,' and with a slow, single-stroke nod in the direction of the window that framed the top of the armchair and Sam's oiled head, added, 'but what would heeee, do?'

Sam had joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor. He was posted on the treacherous northern sea routes delivering supplies to Russia, was sunk twice and very much against the odds, had survived. He was caught in an air raid and injured in transit through London. None of this I had heard from him.



Like many of his generation, he didn't talk much about his war experiences. There was just the occasional reference; a sanitized anecdote. He told me Lord Haw-Haw had announced that the clock on Bangor post office was ten minutes slow, which it was. That steely silence I witnessed in the moment when one day we stood in front of a butcher's shop on the High Street that had had its window blown in by a car bomb. While workmen were busy unloading sheets of plywood from their truck we took in the neat display of meats blasted with shards of glass.

When he died Sam was laid out in his navy uniform complete with campaign medals and ribbon. When nobody was looking my brother knocked on his forehead to make sure he was dead. We then gave him a salute. He was piped out of the funeral home by navy comrades with their shrill whistles.

The Belfast firm of architects my father first worked for specialised in commercial and industrial structures. One of his earliest tasks was to build reception camps for American troops arriving in Northern Ireland in preparation for D-Day. After the war he was sent south of the border to help renovate Boland's Bakery in Dublin. He was billeted in digs on Waterloo Road. He knew nobody in the city and would wander the streets in his spare time, careful to present as a man with a purpose abroad in the Free State. My future mother met him in Donnybrook and got him talking. He never again found his way back home.

When he went to the care home in Bray he went meekly. He had strong views on the treatment of the individual citizen, but he was an accommodating man and he trusted the system.



There were old people here, certainly, but he wasn't one of them. The attrition rate being very much higher amongst the male population, he said to me with an equal measure of curiosity and dismay, 'I seem to be in some kind of women's club.' Surely, now that I was a grown-up I was in a position to judge the matter and decide whether or not he should stay.

He had felt all his life it was incumbent on him never to be lost. I wanted to pipe him out, pipe him home. He knew better - he had been posted abroad and needed to present with a sense of purpose, which was what he did.



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Philip Davison has published nine novels, including *The Book-Thief's Heartbeat*, *McKenzie's Friend*, *Eureka Dunes*, and *Quiet City*.

His play, The Invisible Mending Company was performed in the Peacock Theatre. He writes radio drama. He has co-written two television dramas: Exposure and Criminal Conversation, and Learning Gravity, a documentary film on poet and undertaker, Thomas Lynch. He is a member of Aosdána.
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