

Gerry's Pompeii
Interview with Gerard Dalton by Roc Sandford
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I was born in Athlone on the River Shannon, on the 19th October 1935. Lily was my mother, John was my father's name. They were in livestock farming, and tillage and all that. They had their own small farm of 40 acres – cattle and sheep mostly. Done some potatoes and turnips and parsnips. And onions and carrots. They used to talk about the civil war but they came through alright. I have one sister Katie, Catherine Mary really. She comes here – she was here a week ago – she lives in Perivale. The farm was at Killinure, near Glasson. They called it the Village of the Roses because it's well looked after. I went to school in Athlone. Didn't get much education really, too much time taken up with Irish language instead of other subjects we should have been doing. After school I did farming work on the land. This was during the war, times were bad. I was in the army for a while, not long. I was a bit young for it but I was in it for a while. I went to Northern Ireland. Doing just duty, you know. I didn't shoot anybody. They knew I wasn't old enough. We were getting ready in case there was any trouble – there was bombing in Dublin, the Germans did it by mistake a few times to Ireland.

Afterwards I got jobs here and there on the farm and worked for a Colonel for a while – he was a retired English Colonel, Colonel Harry Rice was his name, he had a young wife named Cynthia, she was quite a lot younger than he was. Many a good night I've spent with them, he had great food, went shopping once a week in Athlone and the food would be delivered to the house. Night time when I was there he would give me some lovely food to eat. The Colonel liked his whiskey, he had only one lung. He was a Colonel in the army during the war. He was a member of the *Inland Waterways Association*. He wrote a book about it – *Thanks for the Memory*, was the name of the book that he wrote. It was all about the River Shannon and its sister rivers and it was good – I've got the book, it's in the cupboard somewhere – it was published, you know by the press.

Colonel Rice had a lovely big house, *Done Roving*, he had it built, a friend that lived not far away that give him a hand – between both of them it took them quite a few years, with trees from all over the world planted, and a nice rockery garden as well. He used to ask me to do some gardening for him around the rockery, keep it clean, you know. I used to go there. He had a big houseboat on the Shannon as well, he had it pulled up near the house. He used to get very important people come to visit him, Sean MacBride used to visit him, celebrities and that, and they'd be up with whisky to three in the morning. I miss him, he died eventually. Very pleasant man he was, so was his wife actually. No children. Very hospitality about them. Well learned of course. He inspired me, he did really, because every tree in the world was planted around that house, it was unbelievable, trees I never heard of and have never seen since.

He died quite suddenly actually, but then his wife died too later on. He died in the early 1960s. She died well into in the 1970s. She died with cancer I think. She was quite young. Only about 60 when she died. She went everywhere for a cure.

To America and everything. To see if they'd get rid of the cancer but it was not good. She spent a lot of money on drugs and that but it didn't seem to help. They didn't have the chemotherapy and everything, couldn't do much for her. She was like a mother to me. She was, yes. I used to cut firewood for her as well.

The *Inland Waterways* bought his house, they use it now for meetings and that. You know.

After Colonel Rice, I came over here in '59 and worked on the railways down in Paddington five or six years, in the parcels depot, storing parcels and putting them on the train. Quite cold in the winter – a big heavy overcoat keeps the cold out – NE wind blowing in there, freezing used to be in January. Very busy station Paddington in those days. They handled thousands of parcels. All going by railway. The lorries used to be down Praed Street lining up doing all the parcel to Paddington. A lot of staff working on it at the time – over 100 porters in the parcel depot.

After that I went to Victoria Station and I done permanent night work there on parcels as well. Sometimes we'd see the people to the trains – passengers coming, we'd carry their luggage, they'd give us a tip, film stars and everything came to Victoria, going to the Continent. Even John Wayne came there. Pretty station Victoria, but I liked it. Used to get the Sunday papers free, before we knocked off, five in the morning, we had them read before we got home.

Then I went to Lucas, cleaning the machines, a big factory in North Acton, I worked there for quite a few years, used to clean the machines out and keep it clean. They were making parts for aircraft. Quite a lot of people employed there. And we'd bring our own sandwiches with us. It was a big factory. It was nice working there, but it closed down and we were all made redundant after about six years. That would be end of the seventies then.

Then I went to the *Institute of Directors*, Hyde Park Corner, I worked there in the kitchen. Prince Charles used to come there and they would treat him to the best of food. Prince Philip and all came there. Used to do weddings on a Saturday afternoon. Every Christmas we would get a bag of shopping free. Everything in it – sausages, meat, coffee, orange drinks, and even Champagne if we wanted it.

The chef in the kitchen was very good. Every Friday night he would give us food to take home, Victor was his name – he was a good man. And two porters there, John and Mary, they were living on the premises, they were nice people too. Used to invite me to their flat and have a good chat and a cup of tea and talk about old times. But like everything else, it closed down and moved to Piccadilly. But most of us were made redundant. They had another house, No10 Piccadilly. The staff were very good there, plenty of Champagne at the weddings, but a lot of the Champagne went down the sink because it wasn't right. We used to get bottles to pour it into and take it home, the best of the Champagnes, made in France. Why not? Instead of pouring it away. The head porter told us to take it home. French Champagne. Same with the food. Half of it went to the pigs. Lovely food wasted. I

don't believe in wasting anything, especially when it's good stuff. That was into the seventies, I came to Fermoy Road in May '59. I came over with a chap I knew. That had a room. I came with a chap that was working in Paddington and he got me the room too. It was easier to get a job in them days. He got me the job. I was living in Fermoy Road, no 29. I moved round here in 1983. I moved most of the stuff myself. Blake's Removals moved the rest of the heavy stuff here. Stuff I couldn't carry. I brought all the fragile stuff – I carried it in my arms.

I worked in the Metropole Hotel in Edgware Road there, in the kitchen quite a few years. It was busy, very busy. After the Metropole, I went to work in the Police Station, Paddington Green, kitchen again. 'Twas alright, wasn't bad. I left there after about five or six years. Then I moved to Shepherds Bush and worked in a café, worked there for a long time. And then done some building work with a friend of mine, an Irish chap. Did some building work. Quite a long time there.

Where'd I go after that? I did work in another café again in Shepherds Bush for a long time. That was my last job. 'Twas a long time, weren't it? I liked it. I'd go by tube. That was about it. Retirement age, weren't I? I've been retired a few years – 60 I think I retired.

'96 I think I made my first statue. I was and I wasn't pleased in a way, because I had to go back over it three or four times before I got it right. *Leo Casey*. An Irish poet. He was a good one. He lived in County Longford. He died on St Patrick's day, 1870. He wrote *The Rising of the Moon* – that made him famous without having to write anything else. He wrote several more poems but some of them got... But it gave me encouragement to do some more which I did. I kept continuing statues after that. The second statue – *Charles II*, the merry monarch. But I had to do them in the summer when the weather was warm. I would do two or three statues together in the hot weather. Turn them out quite frequently. But I worked hard on the statues to get the numbers, you know.

I wanted to do a lot of statues. I couldn't do them in the winter with the cold weather. During the cold weather I would do inside work – paint pictures on the walls, do some modelling. I made Hampton Court Palace with a hammer and chisel and saw, that's all the tools I had, that took quite a while, worked into the night, there was no television in those days much – I wasn't interested I had enough to get on with. Then I done Kensington Palace. A chap got that off me. Cause I had nowhere to put it. But I did Hampton Court Palace. And St Paul's Cathedral which was a bit of a difficult one to do. Basically all done during the winter when I couldn't make statues. The winters were not too bad in those days. Sometimes I would start statues in February or maybe March in the good weather. Go out and make more, you know, that continued on and on until I nearly had a 100 statues. A hundred and fifteen I got now. *Mary Gibson* is the last – she died a young girl. She died very young that girl. John Gibson, her father, he was an architect, famous bloke. Used to make headstones. I like Kensal Green Cemetery, its peace and quiet, isn't it. You know what I mean? You wouldn't know you were in London. Duke of Cambridge, Princess Sophia, Duke of Sussex – he's buried up there too. He died in 1843. Duke of Cambridge died 1904.

When I was making the statues, I had a picture to drive me, a photograph of the person I was doing. I would put in front of the statue, the picture, and I would go from there, which gave me a – it was a good way of doing it I suppose. But then the garden of course – the garden was wild when first I moved round here, especially along the canal. It was covered with beds, bottles and everything else there. Took me about six months to clear it. The Inland Waterways took most of the stuff away, the rubbish, the barge pulled up and I threw it all into it. Managed to level it off. Quite a few artefacts I raked in off the canal and I managed to keep them. There was an ashtray made in Scotland about 16 something and it didn't even break when I was raking it in. It's pure marble, very interesting piece. Sure I got it somewhere. It survived so well. Then there was a piece of a gun I raked in as well, an old-fashioned gun. Several old-fashioned milk bottles I raked in as well, blue and green, back to the Victorian days. And bits of coal – people had coal fires in them days. Managed to keep some of that.

I first got the idea of statues by going to museums. Buckingham Palace gave me the idea when I went to the Trooping of the Colour, but standing by the Victoria memorial that gave me the idea. Not just the memorial, but the palace as well, I decided to make a model of it. I had to search all over London for parts before I was finished. The architecture was difficult, the pillars and windows. I done the inside of its as well, made the old-fashioned beds and put up the pictures.

St Paul's Cathedral was difficult to make too. I did the crypt and even did the tombs. Lord Nelson and Christopher Wren. But it has to be opened up to see inside the chapel. Inside I done a good job on it. Silk I think I used. Quite a lot of tombs in it.

I did a few castles as well. I did Sudeley Castle where Catherine Parr is buried. She was the last wife of Henry VIII. It's a nice castle. It's decorated inside. Not bad. For a beginner, I suppose.

Hampton Court Palace was a bit difficult as well. A lot of work attached to it. It was fine working on it, sometimes I'd go away and leave it and do something else and go back on it again. I had a problem to do the roofs. Had to have some patience. I was getting impatient. Would go away and throw a peg in there and do something else. Managed to decorate it. Looks nice inside. Turned out alright.

I also did Windsor Castle. I managed to do the tower, anyway. But it's so big, it would take up my whole room. It even looks better than the real one.

I chose the subjects for the statues because they done something for the country, they were brilliant in their ways, not only that they were pretty good as far as the battlefield was concerned. *Oliver Cromwell* wasn't a good one, he was a bad one. He was a bad guy. We all know that. He didn't do this country any good either did he? No sirree. The kings years ago used to go into battle themselves on horseback. I didn't do Henry VIII. I did *Anne Boleyn*. I've a small statute of Henry VIII in Hampton Court.

I did *Charles II, James II*, I done some Irish ones – *Oliver Goldsmith. Leo Casey*, as I've said, who was an Irish Poet. He died a young man actually.

And *The Fish Boy* – by looking at the fish in the canal I thought must have him there.

First I planted the trees, the conifers round the edge. Then I planted the others – Llewellyn or something – conifers. I planted a pine tree down the bottom which is fairly tall. My sister brought that from America. It's looking much better – and the house next door they are doing it up. The ivy was really growing into it. Destroying it. Digs into walls.

William III, Charles II, James II – and that's my favourite, Louis XIV. Did a pretty good job on him. He was a man that built Versailles, didn't he? Enormous place.

I'm planting flowers at the moment. The sculpture of me? *Gerry the Gardener*. I'll cut his head off I think. No, it's a failure, don't look like me, but some people say it's alright. Maybe it's the way you look when you are 90. The doctor said you'll live to be 90, Gerry. I may have to do it again when I get around to it.

I never thought I would do so much, but I did do. In the days before television we didn't have much to do so we had to devote our minds to something else. One thing is it kept me off the streets. They'll be astonished what they'll find in my garden in years to come. It'll be like Pompeii or something – Gerry's Pompeii.

Gerard Dalton in conversation with Roc Sandford, neighbour and friend. © June 2014.