Through his letters to fellow friars, and through his Carmelite Newsletter, Fr. Elias Lynch communicated his heart and soul to readers in the English county of Kent, his native Ireland, and throughout the world. At a time when the Carmelite Order, the Church, and society were in constant change, Elias shares with us his personal reflections in a way that is at once poignant, often humorous, and always warm.

The life and insights of Elias Lynch are presented to us by Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm. Fr. Wilfrid is the Parish Priest and Carmelite Prior of Faversham in Kent where Fr. Elias ministered for more than thirty years and established the National Shrine of Saint Jude. Fr. Wilfrid was previously Prior of The Friars, Aylesford, which was re-established as a Carmelite community thanks to the efforts of Elias Lynch and his brothers. Fr. Wilfrid is a well-known ecumenist and broadcaster who has written widely on the spirituality and wisdom of the Carmelite tradition.

"As usual with Carmelites our history is handed down by word of mouth and not in written records … That is why I am writing to you my dear Cahal. In a hundred years time you and I will be dead, and not remembered. If we do not leave behind us something, however imperfectly expressed, as a memory of the Carmelites of our time, the young people who will be Carmelites of the future will have nothing to pin down and say “This is what a Carmelite of 1961 thought and did.”
FRIAR BEYOND THE PALE

A biography of Carmelite friar Fr. Elias Lynch (1897-1967)

by Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.

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Foreword

As Carmelites we’re interested in transformation, growing more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. For years many religious orders sought to achieve this by stamping out individuality and trying to make their young novices fit a certain mould. Albeit from good motives, friaries and monasteries perhaps resembled factory production lines so that – in the words of a friar within my lifetime – ‘you should be able to take a Carmelite from one place, put him in another, and no one visiting the parish or community should notice the difference’.

Thank God the majority of the Church and the Order – aided by better understanding of society and psyche – no longer intends to set Carmelites in a single mould. It is certainly not the authentic model of Carmelite formation; as Saint Teresa of Avila reminds us, the first challenge confronting the human being is to know itself.

Elias Lynch was certainly ahead of his time in celebrating the giftedness of the individual, and knew himself as a child of God, despite his failings and foibles. A member of various Carmelite communities in his life – but most especially in the Kentish parish of Faversham – Elias was able to be his own unique self, and respect those he lived with as reflections of the One God. Elias was a traditional Roman Catholic, but in the best sense of that word: not a traditionalist who clings to something that never was, but rather someone who comes to possess something of value ‘handed down’. In handing tradition on to others, Elias was not afraid to take risks.

In this wonderful biography Wilfrid McGreal has traced Elias’s life and shown that his formation as a friar, which began in Ireland and continued in Rome, was a life-long process nourished by his relationships with fellow friars and the wider world. Elias’s unique personality was nurtured by the spirit of ‘Carmel’, which he regarded as unpretentious and graced with a certain freedom, being the ‘least regimented’ of all religious orders. As Elias wrote to
his confrere Fr. Cahal Gallagher, ‘I am glad that we do not belong to a great overpowering and magnificent religious order where the individual is crushed by the magnificence of his own organization and his only outlet is to talk about the Order to which he belongs.’

This freedom and humility inherent to Carmel made Elias available to all people. His willingness to see others firstly as human beings – and therefore wonderfully made and loved by God – before seeing them as ‘Catholic’ or otherwise meant that Elias was gifted with a warmth and humanity that is still fondly remembered by the more senior brothers in Britain and Ireland.

Today the British Province of Carmelites is a flourishing and ever-evolving community of communities, open to development as the changing needs of the Church and the World become apparent. If we are able to take pride in our achievements, it is because the medieval maxim holds true: ‘we are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants’. This can be considered especially apt in the case of Elias Lynch, ‘The Big Man’ from County Wicklow. At his requiem the Archbishop of Southwark called Elias ‘one of the giants of our day’. Along with his brothers Malachy and Kilian – the former a prior of Aylesford and the latter a Prior General of the entire Order – Elias was part of a wave of giants whose ability to read the signs of the times enabled the British Province to re-establish its roots in the twentieth century. Without Elias’s practical administrative skills, harnessed to the service of the Gospel, it is doubtful that the Province would exist today.

Very importantly Wilfrid knew Elias Lynch and he is to be commended for preserving the memory of Elias’ humour, wisdom, and compassion. Like his subject, Wilfrid is an imaginative, munificent and energetic man whose starting point in any dealings with another person is their innate goodness and humanity. This has enabled him to engage creatively with denominational differences and become a worthy successor to Elias Lynch as a well-respected ecumenist. As a writer and broadcaster Wilfrid has shared his love of Carmel in a way that is both accessible and engaging. Like Elias, his desire to reflect the beauty of God in humanity’s creative spirit has led him to foster strong
relations with a wide range of artists and writers. He has taken to heart the words of Pope John Paul II that ‘The world needs heralds of the gospel who are experts in humanity’.

This biography is being published in the year that the Carmelite Family has designated as the time to mark the eighth centenary of our Rule of Saint Albert. In the Rule the first Carmelite hermits – whom Elias recalled wistfully on various occasions – are wisely advised to ‘keep a tight rein on your mouths… watch your step lest your tongue give offence’ (Chapter 21). It was with amusement then that I read Elias’s observation about his own correspondence: ‘maybe someone will read these lines in days to come and learn that keeping your big mouth shut is not the whole secret of life. There are times and even occasions, when one should keep it open; to a wide degree.’

In reading this story of one of the ‘patriarchs’ of our Province, I promise that you won’t echo the lament of Fr. Elias: ‘I have suffered from people who had nothing to say and would insist on saying it’! Elias certainly had something to say, then and now, and Wilfrid has done a marvellous job of framing The Big Man’s story in Elias’s own words. I am grateful to Wilfrid for this work and to Johan Bergström-Allen for seeing the work through the publication process.

Tony Lester, O.Carm.
Carmelite Provincial Office, York
20th July 2007 – Solemnity of the Prophet Elijah
Foreword by the Author

In 2005 I found myself on the brink of a radical change. After fifteen years at Aylesford Priory in Kent where I had been involved with caring for pilgrims who came to the Shrine and where for over eight years I had been prior of the Carmelite community it was time to move.

Fortunately, I was given a few months sabbatical and the Provincial asked me to go over to the community at Faversham. That meant I would remain in Kent where I had roots in ecumenical activity and the media.

During the sabbatical I began to do some research on Elias Lynch who over four decades had established and rooted Carmelite presence in the small but historical town of Faversham. Gradually, Elias came alive to me as a generous, energetic and creative person. Proud of his Irish country roots, he settled in Kent and became a prominent figure in Faversham. He was ready to be involved in every aspect of life and was ecumenical before the word was common currency. Writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I must admire Elias’s willingness to take risks and commit himself to exciting initiatives. He was a traditional Catholic but was open to ideas and tolerant of people. Today when society seems too often paralysed by fear of terrorists, Elias lived through the World War with a certain nonchalance and was not over anxious in the face of nuclear threat. He was certain of one thing: that the Christian message could overcome Communism. What mattered was getting on with the job in hand and living his life as a Carmelite friar with the minimum of fuss, ready to be a hermit but welcoming true conviviality among the brethren. Posturing was never on his agenda, and mean-minded penitential attitudes received short shrift.

These qualities and his rich character traits have led me to try and chronicle something of Elias’s life. For the most part I have let Elias speak in his own words, but family, friends and Faversham parishioners have filled in the picture. I am especially grateful to his nephew, Dr. Kilian Halpin. However,
Wilfrid McGreal

I feel Elias’s warmth and humanity need to be celebrated. He did have faults, he could be difficult, but he was human. He also stands for a way of living priesthood and Carmelite life that goes beyond his era. He is a reminder that we need larger-than-life characters who are not afraid to make mistakes but who are unfettered by fear and convention.

Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.
Whitefriars, Faversham
July 2007
Introducing Elias Lynch

The story of the Carmelite Order in Britain is one of great achievements, near extinction, and then in the last hundred years or so a renewal and new growth in diversity. In every period there have been outstanding characters.

The medieval period saw figures like John Baconthorpe, Thomas Netter and Thomas Scrope, outstanding theologians and – in the case of Scrope particularly – a zealous pastor. Carmelite friars were prominent in the Reformation; John Bale and John Bird advocates of the new ways, whilst Laurence Cooke in Doncaster was an opponent of Henry VIII. The Penal Days saw many Englishmen and women joining the Order on the Continent with attempts by the friars to re-found houses in England. However, it was the nineteenth century before the Order began to take root in Britain again with the founding of numerous convents of nuns, and figures like Herman Cohen and Benedict Zimmerman enabling the Discalced Carmelite friars to become established here.

After short-lived foundations in Wales and Yorkshire the Carmelite friars took root again in England with foundations in Kent at Sittingbourne and Faversham in 1926.

The re-founding friars came from Ireland, a province of the Order that had survived the Reformation and had already established a presence in North America and Australia.

Among the pioneers of the re-founding in England were three brothers. I would like to tell the story of one of them: Elias Lynch.

Elias, whose baptismal name was Murtagh, was a man of many parts, known as The Big Man and yet as often with those seen as extrovert, sensitive and reflective. His life and his interaction with family, fellow friars and people at large give a fascinating insight into the Church and Society of his day. The
story of the Carmelite way must be a story of people; people with their hopes, visions and fragility. They are always people of their time, and yet they have shaped our present, so it is important we keep the memory alive and tell the story.

The young Elias Lynch.
Part 1

Elias Lynch – Wicklow and Kent

Anyone arriving in Dublin by air or by sea is aware of the mountains that dominate the horizon to the south of the city. Beyond the hills lies Wicklow, a county that for the most part has changed little down the years. The valleys and hills still seem remote and the farms and villages are few and lonely. The green of the valleys and the hillsides provide a living for cattle and sheep farmers. Sadly too many of the hills have been given over to forestry projects that darken the countryside. It is hard to believe that just a few miles to the north lies the urban sprawl of Dublin. Yet here in the south west of Wicklow, in the lea of Lugnaquilla, three brothers were born in a remote farmhouse who were to have an amazing impact on the Catholic community in England and Wales and who would be seen as re-founders of the Carmelite friars in Britain.

Ballymanus is a large, austere, early eighteenth-century house near Aughrim. Originally thatched it acquired a slate roof in the nineteenth century. The house is a place of substance nestling in a valley with a good garden and acres of good land around it before the hillsides take over. The house originally belonged to the O’Byrne family and Billy O’Byrne is remembered for his part in the 1798 rebellion, the uprising that led to the Union of Ireland to Britain in 1801 which paradoxically paved the road for the beginning of the evolution of the present Republic of Ireland. Towards the end of the
nineteenth century Patrick and Bridget Lynch took over the farm and house at Ballymanus, leaving their property on the Carlow-Wicklow border. With new owners Ballymanus took on a fresh lease of life as the Lynchs settled in, making it a home for a family of thirteen children, four girls and nine boys. The three boys who would become Carmelites were at the younger end of the family. One of the girls, Margaret, who was born in 1895 lived on until 1994, a person of amazing vigour. Her life bridged changes in life and technology that were quantum leaps.

The three boys who were to become Carmelite friars were Murtagh (who later took the religious name Elias) born in 1897 (†1967), William (Malachy) born in 1899 (†1972), and Edward (Kilian) who was number twelve among the children, born in 1902 (†1985). For the sake of convenience I will use the names in brackets which they received when they became Carmelites and by which they are more readily recognised.

Fr. Wilfrid McGreal with the nephews of Elias Lynch at the Lynch family home, Ballymanus near Aughrim, County Wicklow.
Growing up in such a large family must have given plenty of scope for challenge and an early sense of community. What was obvious in later years was that while the brothers and sisters could be frank – even blunt – with one another, there was an amazing solidarity among them and deep bonds of loyalty. Let any outsider speak ill or be negative and the ranks were closed with fierce reactions. The story is told that years later Elias criticised his brother Malachy in the presence of Brocard Taylor, an eminent Carmelite who was visiting Faversham. Dr. Taylor, as he was known, joined in the criticism only to find some while after that he was being told that perhaps he might take the next train to London!
Life in the country in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century was far from easy, but on the whole would have differed only slightly from country life in Britain. The worst excesses of landlordism were over and the growth of educational opportunities along with increasing religious tolerance meant that the harsh oppression of the Penal Days were past. Dublin, which was a short journey from Ballymanus, was as vibrant as any city in the United Kingdom. The hope was that Home Rule would come and that issues about property rights would be settled to enable land reform to be enacted. It was, then, a world which was to a great degree at peace with itself, with a strong sense of its history and culture. It was a rural world with its rituals and characters, a world built on trust, hard work and a closeness to nature.

Years later Elias wrote about Wicklow describing himself as ‘one of the sons of the soil’. His picture of the countryside is evocative and loving: ‘The county of Wicklow is like a basket of eggs. Little hills filling into one another building themselves up, until finally there is the biggest mountain in the county, Lugnaquilla. Irish hills and mountains are in a class to themselves. You can walk up and over every mountain there is. The green rushes up from the valleys where rivers flow and end in purple heather covering the upper ridges. Kindly hills sheltering the grouse and partridge; the hare, rabbit and wild goat. Lugnaquilla was more than a mountain; it was a sort of personality. It dominated the lives of farmers. They were always working at the Lug as they called it, to see what weather was coming.’

Elias was born into this beautiful but difficult country in 1897. His father Patrick would have been forty-eight at the time, and Bridget his mother was thirty-seven. Elias was the tenth child. Years later Elias wrote with great insight about his parents. His comments come in one of a number of unpublished letters he wrote to a confrere, Cahal Gallagher. It is likely that the letters were a means of recording memories.
My Dear Cahal,

I knew a man when I was young. He was well past middle age and broad of shoulder. He always wore Irish tweeds, brown with a fleck of red, or green or blue, and boots made by a local shoemaker.

He was tall, with mutton-chop whiskers, and that kindly tolerant smile that comes to men from long endurance. He wore a flat-topped hat, rather like Churchill, black for Sundays and grey for weekdays. He walks with a slow resolute gait of a countryman. He was a moderately successful farmer, who just got by. His wants were few, he had a lovely speaking voice, low and tolerant, and he smiled easily. He seemed to accept life as a Christian should: never expecting too much and yet content with what came. A tolerant man. He used to look at the hills in the morning, as every farmer does and tried to estimate the day. Would it bring rain or sunshine? It was the difference between saving a crop or loosing it. He took what came with the fortitude of a man of the land. He complained as every man did, but he knew that ultimately it was the will of God.

I used to see him go away in his gig behind the best horse he owned; and he never went anywhere without his stick. He was incomplete without it. He was known all over the Wicklow hills as a man to be trusted and liked. As I say, he was a tolerant man. He was my father and I was twelve when he died.

My mother was not a tolerant woman. She was small and some people said she was waspish. It was life that had made her that way. She was born to struggle. She brought up a family of nine sons and four daughters, and I do not recall that any of them are a disgrace to her name. She had a tongue. It could burn the paint off a steam roller. Everyone accepted that. A woman must have her way. It was how she was born. Plenty of endurance, and too much tongue.

In Ireland a family congregates in the kitchen. She always had an audience ready made. It was the only warm place in the house, and we lived in one of the old traditional houses of the Wicklow
Wilfrid McGreal

Hills. Even a big roaring fire couldn’t heat that expanse of table and cupboards because the place was both kitchen and larder; sitting-room and family theatre. She presided, and within her sphere she was supreme. She laid down the law in no uncertain way.

*Letters to Cahal, 31st October 1961.*

Elias was just twelve years old when his father died. It is obvious that Patrick was a great role model for him as a youngster. He admired his constancy and realised that his father was respected by all and sundry. Besides the farm Patrick Lynch was involved in the local community, delegated to superintend projects, taking on responsibilities and helping those less well-off.

Elias seemed to hold his mother as much in awe as in respect. Bringing up such a large family was taxing to say the least, and in the days before laboursaving devices the work load must have been immense. Bridget is remembered for her honest cooking, wonderful apple pies, and constant care for the men of the road who knew they would always be treated generously. She was to live to a good old age and when she died her son Malachy, who was by then Novice Master of the Irish Carmelites, was there to help her journey into eternal life.

The Lynch children would have gone to school and church at Askinagap, just a short step from Ballymanus. By the time the children were growing up the National School had been established there ensuring that the basics of education were available. The Government promised these schools in the light of the 1870 Education Act but in Ireland the downside was in evidence as the schooling was in English and this meant the loss of the use of the Irish language. However, years later Elias was to praise the foundations received there, and certainly his prose style was rugged and direct.
Writing retrospectively in 1962 Elias gives us a vision of Sunday Mass at the turn of the century. Seven Lynch boys in their boots, cottas and cassocks served Mass every Sunday in the small simple chapel that served the rural community. As Elias remarks it was amazing that three of them would become Carmelites. What caught the youthful imagination was the curate who rode over to celebrate Mass.

When it was possible for Catholics to build places of worship in Ireland after the Penal Days they were not allowed to call them churches because that was an offence to the Elizabethan Church of Ireland. So they had to call them chapels. Some of those little chapels in the hills for far-flung farming congregations were bare in the extreme. Just four walls; two rooms leading off the back.
One served as a sacristy and the other as stable for the priest’s horse. Four buttresses leaning against the outside walls kept the place from falling down. There was always a gallery entered by an outside stairway. Downstairs the floor was either flagged or tiled; the forms were just bare and backless. Women went to the left and men to the right. The altar was wood and Saint Patrick stood on the left with Our Lady on the right. Fourteen Stations of the Cross hung around the walls. It was closed all week; never heated on Sundays. You knelt on the bare cold floor with your knees tingling with the hardness of it.

At one time there were seven Lynchs serving on the altar. We wore clobber boots and made as much noise as a company of the Coldstream Guards. If only we had been drilled a little bit, we would have been quite terrifying. I did not know then that I would become the Financial Procurator to resurrect the old English Province of the Carmelites – dead since the Reformation. I didn’t know that my brother, next in years, would become a famous friar to re-found and rebuild at Aylesford the Mother House of the Carmelites in Western Europe; and above all, I didn’t ever anticipate that the youngest would become the Prior General of the Carmelites. Looking back on it I do not see a better origin for ecclesiastical preferment. Farmers ever, just like the Pope.

The priest came riding on a horse from ten miles away, saying Mass half-way on his road. In leggings and riding breeches and quite evidently a horseman. We were proud to see the priest riding a horse that everyone saw was worth £50 at a time when an Irish catholic could not own a horse worth more than £5. As our fathers said, “What he can do today, we will do tomorrow”. One of the congregation always took the horse and led him to the stable at the back of the church. There the horse was watered and fed. Since the walls were not very thick, during the Mass the horse could be heard stomping on the hard cobble stones of the stable. We didn’t mind the stomping at all. It was the most natural sound in the whole world to us. The priest came round to his own half of the back, the sacristy. There, Mrs. Travers, the wife of the custodian, presided. There was a fire and in winter time the priest would come to warm his hands at it, and sometimes wash them at a basin by the wall. We lads stood looking on afraid to move an eyelid.
The priest was terrifying. Mrs. Travers was more than that. She was quite capable of coming over and smacking our ugly faces if we made too much noise or in any way offend the sanctity of the building. Then the priest was vested, and we would all troop out to the wooden floor of the altar, and the noise was horrible.

These priests were country curates, but don’t imagine that at Askinagap chapel either the Mass or the sermon was of low degree. The congregation was on occasions unique. Within the parish of Askinagap was Aughavanagh, the sometime residence of John Redmond, Chairman of the Irish Parliamentary Party of the House of Commons, and some of the finest parliamentarians in Ireland took their holidays in the Wicklow Mountains, shooting, fishing, and of course talking. We knew, or met, many of them, and it was astonishing to find that their attendance at Mass on Sunday was the high point of the day, to hear the exposition of the Gospel by the curates. Forceful, direct, homely, witty and always the strong conclusion. I heard one of the members say that he had never heard any exposition in the House of Commons comparable to the simple forceful exposition of the Gospel by these sons of the soil. Of course that made us very proud indeed. I have been many years a priest now, and can recall how those fellow countrymen of mine faced their simple congregation and got right down to facts with them. They were never afraid to make people laugh. They were never afraid to give a hard dig, and everybody knew what they were talking about; it made it better.

After Mass the curate sat down to a breakfast of two boiled eggs. That is something I never understood as a boy. Why always two boiled eggs? When I was ordained I asked one of the curates the reason for it. He said, “If you had the flavour of bacon floating down on the congregation on a wet Sunday you would empty the church in ten minutes. They would not be able to sit it out and it might give the church a name for high living.” Today the priest comes on a motor cycle or in a car and the horse has gone. A new age. I would love to see a horse being ridden to Askinagap again.

The congregation was unique. Women went into church immediately on arrival; the men stood around the ditch on the far side of the road until the hand bell rang summoning them to Mass and then they made their way slowly into the cold building. But
of course men are a very superior race in Ireland, until they get home. In public they are superb, at home they are sometimes meek indeed. Nevertheless they still hold the right side of the Church and have their rights and responsibilities.

Carmelite News September-October 1962.
The Chapel at Askinagap.

Another memory of Sunday Mass gives insight into how religion can be perceived by the young. As a boy Elias and his contemporaries were intrigued and baffled by the reading then in use for the third Sunday of Lent. The subject of the reading was fornication and so the Sunday acquired the title ‘Fornication Sunday’.

A copy of the Carmelite News from 1954.
It was a day with a feeling of doom and heavy judgement. The curate always preached a sermon on fornication. Now we lads sitting round the altar steps in our crumpled surplices were very hazy about fornication; but we did gather from the priest’s remarks that it was a very fatal disease and highly contagious. In fact we had a desire not to get mixed up with it in any way.

I speak about a special solemnity because not a bonnet was raised during the whole sermon. The women sat silently with their heads bowed as if against a storm. The women on the left, the men on the right, but it seemed to affect the women more heavily. The men took it calmly enough.

Looking down the chapel I remember I could see “Long Tom Doyle’s” bald head glistening in the late winter sunshine which streamed through the long windows. I knew it well because he had a wart on top and I often wondered how he used to be able to avoid knocking it with his hair comb; maybe he didn’t use anything, his head in his hands, sitting it out as it were. He was 6’ 7” tall. I don’t think that Tom had a clear notion about fornication either, because I heard him say that it was prevalent among horses. Old Pat Travers from the gallery beamed down upon the general scene shrouded in his brown grey beard. The shades of “Tom the Hatter” hovered around in the darkness beneath the gallery. The Misses Heffernan sat together, not indeed for mutual protection but because that was always where they sat. It was one of the most withering Sundays of Lent.

After Mass the congregation split up, travelling North and South on foot or in horse-drawn gigs. There was a note of hilarity amongst the men who were on foot; some sly asides and some downright comment upon the state of humanity in general. The men weren’t entirely discreet in the presence of us kids. Maybe they thought we were too young to understand the facts of life.

So, the years went on; we grew in wisdom and in age. It was always evident on that particular Sunday that our sisters were more than usually kind to us, it was as if they feared some awful epidemic was about to overtake us and remove us from their sight. It was a feeling that quickly evaporated and was gone in a few days. I can remember some conversation from those bygone years and I am astonished at how little moderns know about life
Wilfrid McGreal

and how much we knew about life once we had attained a little maturity.

We watched our elders scatter to their lonely homesteads while we wended our ways to the whitewashed house above the singing river. God be with the days when the world was young and we were young with it.

Letters to Cahal.

Among Elias’s memories of his boyhood in Wicklow are stories of eccentric farmers, of crafty deals selling animals or buying land. One old character chewing tobacco nearly killed a cock as he spat out a jet of tobacco juice knocking the bird off its perch on the half door. However, the men of the road touched his heart and were well etched on his memory. One tramp that was a frequent visitor to the family home was Mat Baron and his story has a special poignancy.

Principally I remember Mat Baron, a short man with a beard, dressed in an old frieze coat almost down to his heels. He had a stick. Not one of those sticks with a crook on it, but a straight-up stick that he grasped a few inches below its knob. He carried a big pack on his back tied up in some sort of oilskin. A bearded study in brown and black, going up hill and down dale with his eyes on the ground, as a good travelling man will. The road was more important to him than the scenery.

We used to meet him sometimes on the road as we went to or came from school, this lonely old man without a house or a home. But the peculiar thing about him was this; he was always saying his rosary aloud and to himself as a lonely man will. We kids did not believe that a man would go through his life saying his rosary. We used to hide inside the ditches and listen to him as he passed by. If he knew that we were there or not, we did not care. We were slightly afraid of him although we knew that perhaps a little time later we would find him at our house. He did not seem interested in the world. His sole purpose in life seemed to be wrapped up in
going on. He never imposed. He never stopped in one house more than one night. He was like the pilgrims of old. In the late evening we would find him sitting on the hob by the peat fire, sometimes mending with needle and thread the buttons that had gone adrift on his old frieze coat, and always you could hear the rosary beads near his hand.

Food is good and plentiful in the mountains; but it is rough. Good bread, good butter, good buttermilk and fat bacon – what more could a man want? People go to bed early, and the warmest place in the house is the hearth stone in front of the big fire. Our fire was a big one, maybe seven feet wide. Three fires under three pots boiling for pigs and poultry and whatever it was in the farmyard that had to be fed in the morning. Sometimes I have seen him come in with frost on his beard, covered in snow, and then he would go to his place on the hob beside the fire and dry himself out. Stretched out on the warm hearthstone at night he was warmer than we were upstairs. He was always up at cockcrow.

There was a mystery about him. None ever saw the inside of the pack he carried on his back; and one time my mother suggested to him that it was rumoured around the countryside that he had a monkey in it. Then there was an “earthquake”. Old Mat went down on his hands and knees in front of us all and protested that he had nothing but what he stood up in, that he was a poor man – not merely in the things of life, but poor in hope for the future. I cannot remember the terms of his indignant protest, but I do remember the words with which he ended it up. It was a protest against those who would take the little he had away from him – even his pack.

“To whom that hath, it shall be given; and to whom that hath not, it shall be taken away, even that which he hath.”

I have never seen my mother so frightened in all her life, because she seemed to hear the voice of an old prophet. It is interesting to recall that she was kinder to him after that, kinder than ever she had been to him before.

There was another time when she suggested to him that he was getting too old for the road and that he ought to go into a public institution so that he could be looked after for the rest of his days. That was the suggestion of a practical woman and it
was made in all kindness of heart because I often heard her say that one day the old man would be found dead in a ditch and to her it seemed that a man who would die without the Sacraments, with no one to witness his passing, was not the way a Christian man should die. She had never read the life of Paul the first hermit, and how could she understand that God’s Providence will always look after God’s own. And how could a good woman understand that a man who was not a farmer could be anything else. Farmers she knew, shopkeepers she knew, priests she knew, but a man without a home seemed lost to her and the workhouse seemed a better place.

The years went by and there was little change in old Mat. His rounds became a little shorter, his gait a little slower, and the pack seemed to grow bigger as he bent his face nearer to the ground. He was more silent too, if that was possible; and he seemed to turn a little more fully to the fire as he sat on the hob. But he came and went.

Then one morning a man going to the fair with a creel of young pigs, saw old Mat’s camp beside a turf clamp that showed up black in the morning light, on top of the hill that looks down on Greenane. There was something about his outstretched arm that called for help, so he climbed down and went over to see him. Yes, the old man was in bad shape. The farmer called to the priest’s house and told the priest. So it was that on a late summer morning, on the bare hilltop, surrounded by the heather and the turf, the old man received his last Holy Communion. He died later on in the morning. His pilgrimage was over.

You may know the Wicklow Hills – not those harsh, rugged disturbances pitted with rock and crowned with snow and ice that you see in Switzerland, but hills that flow softly like the breasts of Kathleen Ni Houlihan. The kindest hills in all the world. Some of them run green right up to the top and down the other side. Then you meet the hills where the green runs into bracken, and the bracken runs into heather, where the partridge calls. There is, or used to be, a rabbit in every furze bush; and where you meet the bog, the black cock calls. I wish I could hear again the drumming of the jacksnipe, just when the night is falling down on the world.
and the bees are going home. It is on the top of the hills that you find the turf.

Men go up in the summer time and dig it out with slanes and let it dry. Then they foot it and clamp it, so that the wind blows through it. Then down it comes on sleds to provide fuel for the winter. If there is one memory an Irishman carries with him wherever he goes it is the smell of the turf fire. You get the tang of it over every bog. These turf clamps are one of the most familiar sights in Ireland, and turf cutting and turf harvesting always partakes of something like a picnic. It is a day in the bogs. It was on the shady side of one of these black clamps that Mat Baron laid himself down for the last time.

Well, the doctor came and it was decided not to have an inquest because the man had died of old age. Still dressed in his frieze coat they laid him upon a turf sled and lined it with heather. They made him a rough coffin and painted a cross on it with the red raddle used for marking sheep. Some good woman produced a crucifix instead. They opened his pack, and it was then they found the real nature of the man.

He was an old Carmelite lay-brother from one of the houses in the West of Ireland that had fallen into decay. Finally at the end of the Penal Days, the Community – a Prior and one lay-brother – had dispersed and gone upon their separate ways. In the pack they found his old habit. It was not the Third Order habit that we usually know among the Tertiaries. It was a full and well worn old habit, greasy and a little dirty and he had carried it with him ever since he had been on the road.

These good people knew what a religious habit was, so they stripped him of his old frieze coat and clothed him in his habit. Then, beneath the old coat they found a crucifix on a long chain. Someone noticed that behind the body on the cross was a paper. A paper wrapped on oiled silk, and on it was written Mat Baron’s Vow:
“To walk Thy roads until I die,
in hunger, cold and sunshine
To see Thy cross on every hill,
In the branches of every tree
To see Thy blood upon the stones,
Of every lane and roadway
And bring my soul to God above,
By my Lady’s rosary.”

A Carmelite had gone back to the hermit’s life and had ended his journey like Paul the Hermit.

*Carmelite News* Christmas 1955. Tramps Mat Baron.

The death of the head of the family in 1909 on Boxing Day would have been a moment of crisis. Some of the family was already in Dublin establishing business connections that were to flourish. So before long Elias made the transition from Wicklow to Dublin, not a great distance, but in those pre-1914 days there would have been an immense culture shock. Dublin like any city was a place of contrasts. It had its imposing Georgian squares, affluent suburbs and the beauty of the coast leading out to Bray. It was also a busy port. There was a large British military presence and more than a share of poverty with the attendant ills. Elias was fascinated by the city but he felt he was living in some way on the wrong side of the track. The Grand Canal flowing under Portobello Bridge divided the posh suburbs of Rathmines and Rathgar from areas like the Coombe.

The Coombe, centred round Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, was perhaps the dingiest part of the city with a flavour all of its own. It had almost its own separate language. It was broad and deliciously vulgar. Some of the flavour of it comes out in that old Dublin ditty *Billy Mulligan the pride of Coombe*. Today most of it has been swept away under the cleansing influence of Guinness’ Brewery.
Elias Lynch – Friar Beyond The Pale

Elias remembers the shops selling spare ribs, pigs’ heads and trotters, and he relished the memory of suppers of cabbage and pig’s cheeks. The children of the area were full of mischief, with the girls as brash as the boys.

They had a vocabulary unequalled by any brand of infant produced in the metropolis but their hearts were pure gold. They were the cockneys of Dublin and some of their unique character came down to them from the old Danish settlers in Dublin.

Besides the kids there were the cobblers sitting in their windows to catch the light, not just mending but making shoes of pure leather. The medical hall housed the apothecary with his yellow and green symbols. He made medicine with his pestle and mortar pounding to dust the ingredients that would restore health.

Dublin also offered the young man from the country wonders like the cinema; though silent moving pictures were still a novelty they were a great draw in a city that loved drama. The Dublin trams driven by Wicklow men also stick in his memory; cumbersome vehicles but all part of a new life.

Not far from the Portobello Bridge the great dividing line for Elias was the Portobello Barracks, home to various regiments of the British army. Years later Elias recalls his memories of these soldiers; their forays into Dublin life and their love of pigs’ cheeks and trotters.

Portobello Bridge is long in my memory. You see, it was a canal bridge with a hump on it and the trams used to rattle up and over it like a horse that is clearing a hurdle. About a mile up the canal was Portobello Barracks – it was not spectacular to look at, just that dreary parade-ground in the centre with a sentry at the gate, sergeant majors shouting their heads off and poor infantry men stamping their way over the hard ground. It was just about a half-mile upstream from Portobello Bridge and the banks of the canal were unlighted at that time. The soldiers were always
allowed free on Saturday nights but they had to be in by eleven. I seem to remember names of famous regiments – The King’s Own Scottish Borderers, the Sherwood Foresters – but maybe these are names that come to me from out of the air, I cannot really remember whether they were or not. These young fellows, Scottish or English, used to walk home to barracks up Richmond Hill, sharp right at the canal, swagger sticks under their left arm; those swagger sticks were really things to be coveted – short little canes not more than 18” or 2’ long with a round knob indented with a crest of the regiment. They stuck those swagger canes under their armpit, swung their arms and always in twos made their way home, liberally lubricated with Guinness. At the lower end of Richmond Street there was a shop that specialised in pigs’ trotters; these came salted in barrels from Denmark. It was usual to break open the top of the barrel and turn the tap on so that the soft Dublin water rinsed the salt away, then on Saturday the whole barrel full was boiled and turned out steaming in the window just when the soldier boys were on their way home. Each bought a pair of trotters steaming hot; they had to be wrapped in greaseproof paper and then they were wrapped in a red paper. In that way a soldier could tuck his pair of pigs’ trotters beneath his arm and hold his swagger cane in position with his left hand and you would need to look closely before you could see the parcel. Then, the minute they turned up the darkened banks of the canal they started to eat the trotters. The bare bones went into the canal and I dare say in that stretch of water you could find more eels than in any other part of the canal system. By the time they got to the barrack gate they were ready to turn in.

One must remember that those lads were in a foreign country. They had their own pubs which they frequented in the city and there was a special character to their ruddy red faces, but they marched without looking either to the left or the right; they greeted nobody; they went their way, but they had their friends.

I knew a sergeant once in charge of the privates’ mess and their idea of a party corresponded so closely to my own that I sometimes felt tempted to join the army. I am talking of nearly sixty years ago before the days of the new pig. Those were the days of the large porker, and much of the meat went into pork sausage and other
combinations of minced meat. The pork butcher used to slip his knife beneath the rib cage and with a few deft strokes off would come the whole rib system like a lady’s corset. Of course the meat was salted and smoked – sometimes these spare ribs as they were called came in from Denmark, always salted to cure them, but without brine because otherwise they would be paying freight on water. These spare ribs were boiled with cabbage, but the cabbage wasn’t split up into leaves, it was boiled in the round and then cut into sections, and that was one of the things that sometimes the men craved for and it would be the duty of the Mess Sergeant to go out and buy them. Sometimes he bought a whole barrel full of spare ribs and it was not surprising to see a farmer’s cart from around Templelogue pulling in at the barrack gate with a big load of small Savoy cabbages.

Now I am afraid that these days are all gone in Dublin; we have become far too nice; our manners have improved so much we hardly know ourselves, but I could still tell if there are spare ribs and cabbage passing the front door of a house. How often do I remember smells and flavours of my youth – I never seem to forget and yet I am unable to recover them.

*Letters to Cahal.*

Memories of years gone by. The throw-away remark about thinking of joining the Army is poignant because Elias would have been old enough by then to join but if he had then he would have been caught up into the killing-fields of Flanders.

Like any young person Elias wanted to make something of his life and it is not surprising that the army with its sense of camaraderie should have appealed to his warm outgoing personality. His office job was obviously not enough and so he was open to suggestions. He was aware that while educated in the basics he needed to develop academically, yet he realised what he had to offer was himself. The notion of a calling to the priesthood came as something of a challenge from friends he had got to know in Dublin. They asked “Why
Wilfrid McGreal

don't you become a missionary?” and with that question something stirred in Elias. He realised he had to do something about the future. Not long before he died he wrote about a momentous Saturday evening in his youth that was to change his life.

I am a late vocation. I was working in Dublin in a very unimportant office, but I was a Wicklow man and consequently was in touch with Wicklow men who have a certain community interest. It is a short walk from the Wicklow Hills to a job in Dublin.

One of my friends at the time was a Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. One of his sons, called Matt, was a student of All Hallows College. This is a Missionary College. The Chief Superintendent lived in Dublin Castle, in a house provided by the Administration. I used to go there occasionally in my free time for a cup of tea and one day Matt said to me, “Why don’t you try to become a Missionary?” It was an idea that had never entered my head but I thought about it and in subsequent meetings I talked to him about it, and finally I went one evening to see the head of a missionary congregation. He was out. I waited an hour, and since I have never waited an hour for any man – I walked out. It is a bad idea.

You have to remember how little I had to offer besides myself. I had an elementary education, which meant I could write as well as a scribe, and spell as well as a university professor, and nothing more. These two virtues have remained with me through my life. Now I cannot write so well, but I can still spell. For many years I have tried to teach my secretary the secret of spelling, punctuation and the rest of it.

I was living in Baggot Street, Dublin. I was free on Saturday evening after six o’clock and, because I had been reared in piety, I used to go to confession at the University Church in Stephen’s Green. There was a very fine confessor there who was very popular amongst the elite. I was not part of that. This Saturday night I went in and found about thirty people waiting for confession in rows of seats. I knelt at the back and as the clock passed nine I decided that hope of confessions had finished. I came out into the
porch and stood undecided. Then a man came up to me and said, “I am going over to Whitefriars Street. They hear confessions there until the line is finished.” So, with him, I walked to old Whitefriars Street. Today the church has been modernised out of all comparison. I knew the place well. There was one box occupied by an old priest educated in Louvain who would not let you call him “Father”. He insisted upon being called “Mister”. He used to retort to people who called him “Father”, “I'm not your father.” It was of course, the old French custom coming down from the Penal Days when Irish students were educated in Louvain and were known as “Monsieur l'Abbé.” The Italian custom of “Father” had not been accepted by these men as universal. I have a certain sympathy with them.

So I found myself in the old Whitefriars Street Church, kneeling fourth, or fifth in line. When it came to my turn it was ten o'clock and as I pulled the door of the confessional, out came a bearded friar, tall in his magnificence. He passed me by as if he had not seen me. I was left standing in some puzzlement and then I ducked into the next confessional which was still open for business. By accident, or by design of God, I found myself going to confession to Father John Cogan, the Provincial of the Irish Carmelites. He was, perhaps, the only priest in all of Dublin who could have solved my problem, or would even have taken an interest in it.

I didn’t have much to confess. I was more troubled about the future than the past, and I asked this priest to tell me what to do. I knew by his attitude that I was his last patient because he spent a little more time with me than upon the women who wanted to tell how they lost their tempers with their husbands, or with the children.

He said to me, “You may have a vocation to the religious life. We have no time to go into it now, but will you go out to Terenure College and have a talk with Father John Maganetty and he will sort you out?” I made a telephone appointment.

I had just graduated to a bowler hat and a belted raincoat. I went out to Terenure College and walked up the drive to find a white gate guarding the sacred precincts of the College from ambitious cows. Leaning on the gateway was a bearded friar in Carmelite habit resting his arms upon the top bar. He made no attempt to open the gate to me. I said to him, “I have come to see
Father John Maganetty.” He looked at my bowler hat and belted raincoat and said, “Are you home on furlough?” He opened the gate and let me in. I was about to see a man who became in later years one of the major inconveniences of my life. He asked me what I knew. He found that I knew very little. I didn’t know the difference between the dative and ablative in the Latin declension. He decided to take me. Why, I do not know.

For two years I worked in dumb obedience to a text book until I finally matriculated to the National University. My memory was terrible. My power of concentration poor; but I did possess a certain power of improvisation. That saved me. After a year at the National University, undistinguished by any record, the Superior of the Carmelite Order, reared and matured in the classical tradition, decided that the only thing to do with us was to send us all off to Rome in the hope that Roman education, Roman tradition, would turn us into civilised Europeans and even acceptable Carmelites. I have been glad of that ever since.

If you want to find out what happened to me when I went to Rome read a little letter in a previous edition of the Carmelite News called “The Mouse of San Martino.”

I have often recalled the anonymous man who spoke a few casual words to me in the porch of the University Church, Stephen’s Green, Dublin. I remember we paused for a moment opposite York Street to decide whether we would go to Clarendon Street or Whitefriars Street, both of them Carmelite Churches, one Calced and the other Discalced. We decided in favour of Whitefriars Street because, in the words of my friend, “They are not so holy over there.” We entered the church and went our different ways; I to be a Carmelite, and he to go home to his wife. He didn’t know, and nor did I, that our casual encounter that night made three men Carmelites, because my two brothers followed me into the Order; one of them was to become its Prior General.

What a thought it is! How a casual encounter in the porch of a church can start a reaction that will change the lives of three men, who in struggle and strife will one day arrive at the priesthood. I had no idea that joining the Carmelites was only just a little worse than joining the French Foreign Legion.

Carmelite News May 1964. Late Vocations.
Fr. John Stanislaus Megannety (front left) in Avoca, the area where Elias Lynch grew up. Others shown here during the Silver Jubilee of Fr. Cogan are (left-right) Fr. McCabe, Fr. R. Walsh, Mrs. Hickey, Fr. Griffin and Fr. Colfer.
The throwaway line “joining the Carmelites was only just a little worse than joining the French Foreign Legion” perhaps had some truth when we hear something of the rigours of life for a young Carmelite in the early years of the twentieth century.

Years later Elias was to call the Carmelites the least regimented of all orders, but in the early part of the twentieth century the Order like many other religious families was suffering from the after-effects of the upheaval of Europe in the nineteenth century and anti-clericalism. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Carmelite friars in Ireland could be aware that despite relatively small numbers they were active and reaching out with new ventures in New York and Australia. Their presence in Dublin was well established and Dr. Spratt had been a focus of energy with the works for the poor that he initiated from Whitefriars Street in the mid-nineteenth century.

However, in the years just before the outbreak of the First World War a certain rigour was introduced into the day-to-day living of the friars which came partially from the Church climate of the day and the zeal of the Prior Provincial, Father Southwell. Added to that, Roman superiors had the school at Terenure closed, being seen as an inappropriate apostolate. Despite the negatives, Dublin folk had a special love for the friars and among their numbers were individuals who would reinvigorate the Order in Ireland and influence a new generation. Among these was Elias Magennis and John Cogan. The former would prove to be a most effective Prior General, while John Cogan would give sensitive leadership to the Order in Ireland. Both were to be key figures in supporting the re-founding of the Order in Britain offering their support and leadership. Elias’s early years in the Order correspond to the years when the struggle for Irish independence was at its height. A number of Carmelites in Dublin and New York including Elias Magennis were fervent supporters of the struggle. Whitefriars Street was only a stone’s throw from Stephen’s Green and the Post Office, scenes of the Easter Rising. However,
while some members of his family were caught up in the Troubles, Elias – who was always proud of his roots – never seems to have been involved in the world of nationalism.

Elias does leave us with some references to his early days in the Order, painting pictures of a certain austerity which he bore with reluctance. His reluctance was rooted in an awareness that young friars were treated without sufficient care for their health and welfare. Certainly in later life he always ensured that those he lived with never lacked good food and proper support.
Elias has left us with a picture of his early years in the Order after his time as a novice at Terenure in the southern suburbs of Dublin.

The years went on and I became a seminary student in the Carmelites four miles out upon the right side of the track. I became a novice in the Carmelites; then I was professed; then I matriculated at the National University and of course I had to attend lectures at the University every day – sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon and one had to eat in between. The only way that that could be done was to walk back the four to five miles between the University and Terenure College to pick up enough energy to walk back again. Sometimes it meant walking the best part of twenty miles a day. I have stated somewhere in my memoirs that joining the Carmelites at that
time was like joining the Foreign Legion. The Foreign legion had the advantage that they wore boots and socks; they wore heavy coats in the heat to keep the sun out, but when they arrived at barracks they had wine, women and song. We students started the day upon porridge, skimmed milk, shell cocoa, bread and margarine, and from there on we faced the day. It never occurred to any Superior of the Carmelites in those days that it was four to five miles from the College to the University, but you had to get there and back again, maybe twice a day. Many of my fellow students had bicycles – I had a bicycle too, but I learned that out of consideration for the public I had better walk. One day when I went by bicycle I ran broadside on to a car and ended up sitting on the bonnet. It wasn’t nice.

However, I got through the Arts course, but all my reactions were those of a country lad. One day I walked over the hump of
Portobello Bridge; on the right-hand side of the street there were a greengrocer’s and butcher’s side-by-side just beside where the tram cars used to stop. The greengrocer displayed his potatoes in trays in the open and as I walked by, out from the butcher’s shop ran a mongrel dog carrying in his mouth a large steak; my reactions were immediate, I picked up a potato from the open tray and threw it at the dog. It caught him right behind the ear and he dropped the steak and ran yelping away. Then I found that the tram driver had been a witness to the incident. He leaned out of his cab and clapped me right heartily. The butcher crossed the street and retrieved his steak – what he did with it I never enquired, but I don’t suppose that dog ever tried to steal another steak from that butcher’s shop.

Then, somehow or other, the story got around and the drivers who were Wicklow men welcomed me on board their trams. Of course there were inspectors and occasionally they got on, but the conductor would come along and give me a ticket, which he had to account for at the end of his journey. This troubled my conscience. My brother Jim lived a short way up the canal and I told him this story so he went and got four five-shilling bags of copper and said, “Give that to the man in charge at the terminus and whenever you are short of a ticket they can take the money from that.” Well, it seemed to me that that pound in copper lasted a long time, but I never walked again if I could help it, that stretch of straight road from Terenure to Harcourt Street Station. It made a big difference to me. Can you imagine it? It never occurred to our venerable superiors to give even one of us our tram fare when the weather turned to rain or snow.

*Trams and Terenure*
The incident with the bicycle says something about Elias for while he was physically big he never felt totally at ease with his body, sensing an awkwardness. In later years he could seem big and fierce but it was an exterior that belied a gentleness and a vulnerability.

The old cliché of ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’ applied to the next stage in Elias’s Carmelite formation. He was sent to Rome along with a small group of his contemporaries, one of whom being his younger brother Malachy [William] who had followed him into the Order. They were both professed as Carmelites in 1918 and were to spend six years in Rome until their ordination in 1925.

Malachy Lynch, brother of Elias and Parish Priest in Faversham 1927-29.
Writing in 1961 Elias gives his picture of that period. Most of the time was spent in the old Carmelite Priory of Saint Martin (San Martino ai Monti) which was near the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, while the latter part was spent at the International Study Centre of Saint Albert (Sant’Alberto) close by Castel Sant’Angelo and the Tiber. Writing in 1961 he gives a vivid picture of those days.

I was nineteen before I started to learn Latin. I had a bad memory and it was a terrible task. Eventually I matriculated to the National University of Dublin and after a few years my Superiors decided that our class was very poor material, and that higher education was a waste of money. At that time there was a line of Superiors in the Province who were right out of the top drawer in academic qualifications. They looked upon our generation as being just the run of the mill. Life has since taught them some lessons, but many of them died without repenting their errors. They yanked us out of the University and drafted us into what they proudly called the Collegio di San Martino ai Monti in Rome. We were a new growth in that place. Mushrooms in an old shed.

San Martino was an old Carmelite convent belonging to the Roman Province, mostly unused, and we settled down under a Maltese Superior, a delightful old boy, strict but kindly, and he liked the Irish. We learned as time went on that his occasional explosions of temperament were just a national characteristic. We were only a dozen or so, and of no importance whatsoever.

There was a great big ‘sala’ or room framed with pictures of old Carmelite saints, all numbered because they were, as was the convent, the property of the Italian Government. That august body had confiscated all religious property on the formation of United Italy. Those who know Italy may recall that a United Italy is a fantasy of nationalistic imagination. However that is only a part of the story. Even the chairs and settees around the walls belonged to the Government, as did indeed the very tiles upon which we walked. There was a small kitchen, a makeshift oratory, a few single rooms for the Prior and senior students. The
rest of us were bedded down in a large room divided by curtains into cubicles. The cubicles were roomy, I admit. There was a very large window at one end and a very small top window at the other. There was plenty of light and of course the climate was hot enough for Africans. Each of us had our cubicle and that was the only privacy we had. There was a small bedside table and a few hooks on which to hang our habits. Beds were old iron bedsteads boarded with wood on which lay a straw mattress. There was no intention of turning into guardsmen but those beds certainly did give us straight backs, and very often a certain soreness where soreness is not appreciated amongst students who must sit for the waking hours of the day on hard benches and unyielding choir stalls. It was a hard life but we were young and prepared for anything. I still look back and wonder how on earth we endured it.

Looking down into the garden of San Martino the big crickets used to rub their legs all day in the trees creating the cricket noise. We didn’t like them very much, because they were the same colour as the leaves and one is not interested in what one cannot see. On our beds in the cubicles we had sheets and a blanket and a bolster as hard as wood. I had the end cubicle. Sometimes I lay there sweating out the Roman day. I noticed a hole in the corner of the wainscoting and if you remained quiet, out used to come a little mouse. First his head and whiskers – and what magnificent whiskers they were. Beautiful! Surely three inches wide. There he used to sit halfway out of the hole looking at me. Then I began to leave a little of the mousetrap cheese on which we were fed and a crust of bread outside the hole. Sure enough he took it, and then I began to love mice. This graceful little chap used to raise the small chunk of cheese in his two pink paws and eat it up. Bread he didn’t much care for, but eventually it used to disappear. In that end cubicle he and I were like Saint Jerome and the lion. He did love cheese. Also he had a sense of time. He knew exactly when the cheese should appear and evidently expected it. He was not afraid. He was just like a little man sitting on a fence.

One day I forgot the cheese, because instead of the yellow hard cheese the Prior decided to give us nice cream cheese so I ate the lot and there was nothing left for the mouse. I lay down on the hard bed for the siesta and went half asleep. Suddenly I wakened,
and there was Mr. Mouse sitting on the bolster beside my head as much as to say, “What has happened to you? Where is my cheese?” There was nothing I could do about it except to promise him that next day he would have a double portion. We became very friendly. I loved his whiskers and his clean pink paws. He was a little gentleman. In the end I used to find him sitting on my bolster when I came home and he would not stir. Sometimes at night I used to feel him scrambling around the bed. He was becoming very friendly indeed. One evening as he sat on the little ledge I saw another whisker behind him. I thought, “Now you have got a wife.” But that was not the end of it. In about ten days out came five little chaps just like father and mother and then the cheese became quite a problem. I had to confide in other students, but I found that there was a great divergence of opinion on mice. The whole difficulty was solved because eventually the student body of San Martino was moved to Sant’Alberto and the Italian mice of San Martino were left to find another patron.

At San Martino we were up and about at five in the morning. Then we had a half-hour’s meditation in choir. At least that was the intention, but I am afraid that many of us went to sleep. Don’t regard that as lack of piety, it was just that we were students from the soft humid green Isle of Erin and the Roman heat sucked our very lives away. Not that anybody noticed it in the least. Roman Superiors are the most hard-hearted category of men in the whole wide world.

After meditation we had morning hours. After a quick breakfast of coffee and rolls with butter of a very suspicious character we set out upon a four mile walk to the Collegio di Sant’Alberto down the verges of Saint Peter’s. There we spent the morning and afternoon before we returned home. They were trying to make us philosophers and theologians.

I well remember the morning’s journey and equally well the return in the afternoon. We always went the same road. We got to know every inch of it. We knew the smell of every shop we passed. We began to know even the people who lived and worked in the streets. We were a class apart from them. They paid little attention to us but we noticed them. How I remember the cobble stones! How I remember the steps we climbed down in the morning and
climbed up in the afternoon. How I still remember the smells and the stinks of the Roman back streets.

This is what we saw in the morning. We climbed the cobbles of an ascending street and then down about thirty steps to drop into a by-street before we came out on the main avenue. Tenement flats seven storeys high on each side mercifully shaded us from the morning sun. There was the stink of every human, animal and vegetable. We passed under a canopy of washing hung out from the windows above. Some of those washing lines extended to about eight feet over the street. They had most ingenious ways of pulling out and pulling in the washing and of seeing that things didn’t drop off. Every kind of male and female garment fluttered in the wind and became dry in the hot Italian sun. Laundry was not a question of drying; it was just a question of washing. In those tenements hundreds of people lived; kindly and talkative. In them they were born, lived and died. They were not concerned with us and we were not concerned with them.

But there was Neddy. Neddy was the scruffiest donkey you ever saw. He belonged to a charcoal burner. His job was to carry in the panniers on each side of his back a load of wood to a backyard where his master burned it to make charcoal.

You must remember that Roman women did not use gas or electricity or coal to prepare their meals, they used charcoal. There is no elaborate kitchen equipment. There is just a pan with a number of holes to give air when the charcoal is lit. Over the charcoal pans, meals simple and elaborate were prepared. Have you ever tasted a steak prepared over a charcoal fire? When it is just hot and frizzling they spread a mixture of Italian cheese and butter over it with a little salt or pepper. Never forget the chip potatoes. In France they call it Chateaubriand steak. It is served on a twelve inch plate. Dinner starts with a generous plate of macaroni or spaghetti dusted with cheese and then follows the steak and chips. When an Italian gets that under his belt he is at peace with his wife and therefore the world for the next two days. This is to show how important charcoal is, because there is nothing to replace charcoal in cooking. It is hot, yet it is slow and it gives that inimitable flavour to steak that no other method of cooking gives. I have often wondered what a revolution would
come about in Ireland if wives could provide their husbands with food like that. How happy men would be!

But we must return to Neddy. He had the longest ears of any ass I ever saw, but he wasn’t interested in us. Why should he be? We were just about as interesting as a procession of ducks. Neddy had his rights in that street. He had established them by long and painful endeavour and he preserved them by the force of his two hind legs which could teach a lesson to anyone who intruded on his territory.

In that narrow street of Roman tenements the ash can is the recipient of everything that is thrown away. Into it went ashes, broken plates, cabbage leaves and the residue from every kind of vegetable from the Roman markets. Lettuces, artichokes, onion tops, in fact the lot. Neddy had a way of teaching manners to people. In time the housewives learned that all residue in bread and vegetables should be placed neatly on top of the ash cans because if they were not Neddy would knock the ash cans over and spread the contents over the street. The resulting war with the dustmen was not a subject for poetry.

Roman students walk in crocodile two by two, like the animals going into Noah’s ark. We used to go down through that noisy, roaring tunnel between the Quirinale Palace to the Piazza d’Espagne, past the statue of the Immaculate Conception, over the bridge of the Tiber to our academic day in the Collegio di Sant’Alberto. Sweating in the hot Italian morning sun, footsore and tired, to commence a day that would have horrified any university student of modern days. Let no-one ever tell me that the life of a student in Rome is a picnic. It is more like Devil’s Island.

We started home about five o’clock in the evening and we tried to avoid the crowded streets and go through the lanes. There was more shade. In the narrow lanes the broad-minded ladies of the Roman scene congregated to catch the eye of passers-by. We walked past them with eyes ahead like Her Majesty’s Brigade of Guards, but we had to bear the barrage of comment that came forth from the four corners of the lanes. I cannot tell you what they used to say, I can only indicate it. We were a normally good-looking lot of young fellows in the twenties; tall, athletic, and of course
dedicated to the higher life. We carried our books under our arms or hung in a satchel from our shoulders. The general substance of their remarks was that we represented a terrible waste of good human material; that, in fact, we had fallen into the wrong hands. They had their likes and dislikes among us but there was one who excelled beyond all others in their preferment; a handsome young redhead from County Tipperary. They couldn’t understand why it was that such a handsome fellow could find himself marching

The story of the Mouse of San Martino as it originally appeared in The Carmelite News.
Wilfrid McGreal

in a crocodile of dedicated celibates. They didn’t know that we understood Italian and of course they didn’t understand English; but we had fun.

One day we met the Parish Priest of that district because our choir was invited to a function in his church. We told him about our experiences in the lanes. He told us that these women were the most generous donors to Saint Anthony’s Bread in the whole parish; that although they would not officially have anything to do with him their charity towards the poor was boundless. His comment was, “There is good in everybody.” Much water has flowed under the bridges of the Tiber in the forty years that divide us from then. Life has taught me also that there is much good in even the worst of us.


While the years in Rome had their downsides it must have been exciting and exhilarating to be in a city with such history and art. It was also – as in Ireland – a time of upheaval as the legacy of the World War reshaped Europe. Certainly both Elias and Malachy learned to value art and to appreciate those things that made for human development.

The beauty of Rome and its vitality constantly fascinated Elias and he was left with enduring memories of life at so many levels in the Rome of the 1920s.

The Piazza d’Espagna lies at the foot of the Pincio, one of the Seven Hills of Rome. One street as straight as an arrow leads to the Piazza del Populo. It is called the Via del Babuino. A parallel street is called the Via Margutta. The backyards of the shops and houses of the Via del Babuino almost screwed themselves into the rising slopes of the Pincio and if, my dear Cahal, you ever have any doubts about the Seven Hills of Rome spend a few years as a Roman student and you will find that in that apparently flat plain you are always climbing up or climbing down. It was not difficult for me because I am a mountainy man and the calves of my legs
were well developed and I like hills. I like the going up and the coming down.

I had a curious mind. I didn’t like the crocodile marches out of college and home again, climbing up to the Pincio or up to the Gianiculum. Going down the Via del Babuino we could see in front of us Monti Mario, another of those Seven Hills, but since our hours for footslogging were limited I do not think that we ever climbed Monti Mario. I have heard some American sect bought a site on top of Monti Mario on which they hoped to build something that would rival Saint Peter’s, but the Planning Authorities of Rome wisely decided that such a counter attraction would never have the same tourist pull as Saint Peter’s and the Vatican.

The quarter that I speak about enclosed by the Via del Babuino and the Via Margutta is the centre of the artistic life of Rome. The people who reside there are a variegated crowd – artists, painters, sculptors, smithies in wrought iron – in fact they embraced every variety of art in its changing fashion. You can walk down the streets window-shopping, as it were, and see a lamp standard, just the very thing your wife wanted, or some other little gadget in wrought iron or brass. Italians are experts in that work. You could listen, as I have, outside the door of a smithy and hear the hammers tinkling on anvils and you knew that a garden gate or an electric light standard, or some other example of wrought iron, was taking shape. Every craftsman likes someone who is interested in his craft and after a while those smithies began to know me, but they regarded me as just being a curious observer. They didn’t mind if I walked in and looked at a young fellow, hammering out some design upon the horn of an anvil. What a district that is! Honest smithies, painters, trying to judge the wind of fashion, free livers, most of them living with their mistresses having no interest at all in such curiosities as a friar in brown. To them he was just as interesting as a country mule, and just as ordinary.

Speaking about mules, the district was dotted with wine shops and there was a weekly delivery of wine from the Alban Hills. Every wine-cart had its barrels, sometimes two, sometimes four, drawn by one mule or two as necessity demanded. The driver always had an awning which he could pull down over his head in the noon-day sun and there was always a watchdog; a fierce little
Wilfrid McGreal

terrier type, and no one could approach that cart except over his
dead body. You can see these mule wine-carts standing outside a
wine shop and the wine is of every variety. Excellent, or just good,
or bad, according to your pocket.

Always, of course there was the Italian “pasta”. In that
district you didn’t have to walk fifty yards and be short of a
heaped-up plate of macaroni or spaghetti in the Milan, Bologna
or Neapolitan style. Wine was the drink, and coffee to cure the
headache. That district was full of human variety. Tradesmen,
shop-keepers, sculptors, painters, pimps, street women – the lot.
Few people paid any attention to the morals or activities of the
people next door. Few landladies bothered about the lives of those
who lived upstairs; they had enough hardship to scratch a living
from the improvident types who lived on the passing mood.

*Letters to Cahal, 50.*

Elias found himself involved with one particular artist and the resulting tussle
says something about the friar’s resolution and his judgement.

I knew one man fairly well. He was an artist and he had a
big front room which he hired out for one-man shows. One day it
would be filled with pictures, another day with ceramics, another
with glass, and then again with sculpture of one kind or another.
There was one sculptor who had a private income. He spent his
whole life upon a masterpiece. It was twenty-feet high and a
terrifying spectacle, but day after day he chipped and chipped and
stood back and looked and chipped again with rough chisel and
fine chisel. I don’t know what happened to it in the end, but he
used to say it was going to Brazil. Maybe it has ended up in the
new capital city of Brasilia – I hope he got paid for it. It became
so famous in the end that people used to drop in to see how it was
going on. He would work away without even looking at them. If
you spoke to him he waved you away as much as to say, ‘don’t
interrupt the profundity of my thought.’
I liked talking to this artist who hired out his front room. The hallway was covered with paintings, mostly small in size. One day I thought that I would seek his advice on a small commission. I had been home to Ireland and during my absence a venerable uncle had passed away and I called to see the family. This man was a noted character but the only trace of him that remained was an old faded photograph showing three quarters of his face. His wife deplored that there was nothing better by which he could be remembered and she asked me if I could do anything to persuade a photographer to make a better reproduction; but I didn’t think that was the solution. I decided that I would bring the photo to Rome with me and get some artist to reproduce it in black and white on a sort of biscuit-brown paper to warm it up. I was not trying to reproduce a Leonardo da Vinci cartoon.

I had this faded photo in my pocket one day as I wandered down the street so I let my friend see it. “It’s the only surviving photograph of him,” I said. He looked at it gravely for a while then said, “Ah, what character! What strength! What a magnificent head! What a pity! If he had lived in the days of Michelangelo he would have become immortal on the roof of the Sistine Chapel.”

“Perhaps you know some young artist,” said I, “who could do a charcoal drawing on a biscuit-coloured paper, with just enough detail to show the sort of man he was?”

My venerable uncle had a face like the Rock of Cashel, a fact not always appreciated by his immediate relations because he was just about as flexible as granite, and he had a sense of humour and a gift of expression equalled by few. “Yes,” the man from the gallery said, “I will see what can be done.” The fee promised was 5,000 lire.

I left him to it for a month. Then I called in just to see how it was getting on, and he gravely unrolled for me a canvas, in colour, sixteen inches by twenty. This was not what I had wanted and I told him so. “But,” said he, “it is disgraceful that your venerable relation should have no other memory than a few lines of charcoal on tinted paper.” Was I not proud of him? Had I no respect for the dead? Surely my better feelings should prevail in a matter of this kind. It didn’t matter to him, he was not making any money out of it. This he said, and a lot more. I had been looking at
the painting waiting patiently for the rain to stop, because the words fell away from him like a torrent from the skies. Then I noticed something about the canvas. I could see the brush marks of shoulders; I could see his collar and tie had been painted in style, but the face looked peculiarly flat. I tilted it to the light and although I could see the varnish on the features I immediately saw what had happened. Some young fellow handy with crayons had drawn the head; someone else had drawn the shoulders; the whole had been sprayed over with a clear varnish to match it up. The man from the gallery saw the look in my eye. He saw the way I tilted the canvas to catch the light and I said to him, “This isn’t a painting, it is only half a painting. The features have been done in crayon and the whole sprayed over with varnish.” He looked. He took the canvas and tilted it just as I had done and then he turned with a look of blank astonishment on his face. He was speechless. Maybe he had no words for this occasion. He made as if he would tear the thing in two, but compromised by throwing it on the floor. He called upon the Madonna to bear witness how grievously his honour had been compromised by skulduggery. He laid a consoling hand upon my shoulder and promised that in just one week I would have what had been promised me.

I went some time latter with the 5,000 lire and received a very satisfactory drawing of my deceased uncle. The man from the gallery left me for a few moments to get something in which to roll the drawing and then I spied my respected uncle hanging in a quiet corner. By this time the canvas had been spread on a wooden frame and the price was marked 10,000 lire. It now adorns some home in the Middle West of America. I am quite sure the old man, if he still can see the world around him, enjoys the view from the endless prairies.

*Letters to Cahal, 51.*
On 29th June 1925 Elias and his younger brother Malachy were ordained by Cardinal Pompeii at the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina. The church where they were ordained today stands on the Via della Conciliazione, the great sweep of road that leads to Saint Peter’s. In 1925 the Church which was part of a Carmelite priory was in a maze of streets called the Borgo. It was an area associated in the Middle Ages with English pilgrims. Much of the district was cleared by Mussolini around 1930 and as a result the Church is one of the few old buildings as you approach Saint Peter’s.