

Behaving Badly

CLIFF GOODWIN



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About the Book

Richard Harris was never an easy person to get along with. He was a difficult schoolboy (and was later disowned by his Limerick teachers), then he went to work in the family flour and milling business - where he organised a strike against his father.

It was as a gifted and compelling actor that Richard Harris dominated stage and screen for more than four decades. He was nominated for an Oscar twice: for his earthy portrayal of a rugby player in *This Sporting Life* and as a dominant and bullish Irish farmer in *The Field*. More recently he delivered gripping screen performances in *Gladiator* and two *Harry Potter* films.

But it was his violent, drunken, womanising private life that fed the public myth and made Harris, one of a new breed of rogue male actors, an international celebrity. Married and divorced twice, with three sons - two actors, one a film director - he claimed the only time he had been miscast was as a husband. His lovers included legends such as Merle Oberon, Sophia Loren, Ava Gardner and Vanessa Redgrave.

About the Author

Cliff Goodwin, author of the bestselling *Evil Spirits: The Life of Oliver Reed*, has interviewed some of Harris's closest friends and fellow actors to amass a wealth of previously unpublished stories and information about a man who frequently lived as a recluse – but never failed to make headlines.

BEHAVING BADLY

The Life of Richard Harris
1930–2002

Cliff Goodwin



From a nine-year-old girl who fell in love with Albus
Dumbledore and her mother who fell in love with King
Arthur.

- *entry in Limerick Book of Condolence*

PROLOGUE

One forgets too easily the difference between a man and his image, and that there is none between the sound of his voice on the screen and in real life.

– *Robert Bresson*

It must have seemed to Richard Harris, as it did to Bull McCabe, the irascible unforgiving landowner he played in *The Field*, that he had reached a time in his life when compromises were no longer an option. It was a time beyond the edge of shame when, facing the prospect of a new oblivion, Harris declared, 'I want to make worthwhile movies again.'

In the final scene of the film, McCabe wades into the Atlantic Ocean and vents his frustration and anger and fear by beating the waves with his stick, challenging the tide and the consequences of his own actions to sweep him off his feet just as, years earlier, Harris had bloodied his fists in frustration on the bonnets and windscreens of cars whose drivers were not brave enough to run him down.

But McCabe was not Harris. This was no alter ego. This was far more complicated. McCabe, as the actor readily admitted, was a character created from a life of weaknesses and defeats: from a remarkable international debut in *This Sporting Life*; from the bitterness and rivalry of Hollywood; from a million-selling record and a few outstanding, yet unsold, books of poetry; from a couple of half-decent adventure films; from the long history of drunken adventures; from the near-fatal accidents and illnesses; from a string of dreadful B-movies; from the abandoned

wives and necessary lovers; from the careless friends; and from the curious years of self-imposed retirement.

A recent generation of film fans has judged Bull McCabe as one of the actor's principal masterpieces. Perhaps Harris had – unwittingly – put more of himself into the part than he intended. If that is correct, only his true friends can appreciate how close to the truth Harris got. The rest of us, and that includes his fellow actors, can only admire his determination and sense of craft and guess at the real measure of his talent.

Harris, it would seem, ranked among that rare breed of actors who openly confess their dislike of the film industry. 'There are far too many prima donnas in this business and not enough action,' he repeatedly claimed. This was one reason he rarely watched modern movies – and hardly ever his own.

His personal obsessions leaned heavily on his integrity as an artist: industry, independence and incorruptibility; an avoidance of imitation; a disgust of sloppy workmanship; a hatred of can't; and a compelling competitive spirit.

Once, in his youth, he aspired to do well at rugby, to play for Ireland and, when he was not leading his team to victory against the English, to write hard and thoughtful poetry. In later years he had another sport. Just as the rest of us enjoyed listening as he did it, he enjoyed deflating the egos of his fellow actors who, he claimed, talked like Oscar winners but delivered only polychrome trash. Harris detested the aura of celebrity and elitism. 'Actors are not important,' he insisted. 'Not like Beethoven or Van Gogh or Francis Bacon.'

It was all good headline-making stuff. But Harris's own shortcomings were just as real and almost never denied by the actor himself. His notoriously short temper could be ignited at any time by almost anything. Sometimes, what started as a drunken spat congealed into a rejection of someone he loved – and who loved him – which lasted for

decades. Disloyalty, to Harris or his friends and family or his profession, provoked instant and public retribution. Ask Michael Caine. On the other hand, an act of kindness or loyalty produced a tender, equally public and lasting declaration of faith.

If the star of *This Sporting Life*, *Camelot* and *The Field* had been diminutive or sickly or contemptibly feeble, paid to live out a stronger man's fantasy, he would still have been one of the world's greatest actors.

But he was no weed. He was six foot two, broad-chested, manly, attractive and hungry. It was this fusion of ruggedness and sensitivity, machismo and originality, that came to be Richard Harris's unstoppable movie myth. It is a compulsive legend, made all the more compelling by his apparent disregard for his own life while showing endless concern for the welfare of others.

Perhaps he sometimes looked down the road from which he had come, wondering where it all began, where the false starts and wrong turns had been - 'I do my job and I do it well. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I fail. Sometimes I'm brilliant, sometimes I'm not. It really doesn't matter.'

Perhaps, also, he sometimes looked back to a clearer scene, to a country and a town to which he remained true; to the early mornings of his childhood and of playing in the neatly kept garden of his home on the outskirts of Limerick; to the clamour and chatter and laughter of a large warm family; to the smell of his father's work clothes stiff with flour dust; to his mother's busy love; to the summer upheaval of moving to Kilkee, where he would paddle in the cold Atlantic waters; and then, each night, to the silence that came when the family and the house finally went to sleep and he was left to fashion his dreams in what, to a young boy, must have seemed the still point of his world.

CHAPTER ONE

By his late teens Harris was already fourteen stone and an athletic six foot one. Much of his school rugby career was spent packing down as a rebellious and wandering lock, though 'I was too busy and knackered scoring tries to bother too much with scrummaging.' It was, he claims, his first case of miscasting.

Harris's dedication to rugby - and to *winning* at rugby - received some unusual benefaction. In 1947 Crescent College met PBC Cork in the final of the Munster Schools Senior Cup. Harris was forced to watch the impressive but indecisive match from the sidelines. Before the replay, one of Crescent's forwards left the college to start work and Harris, still only sixteen, was called into the team alongside his older brother Ivan. The danger player in the Cork side was a full-back named Mick Brosnahan, who Harris had a hunch would turn out in the fly-half position. For three hours each day Harris and his Crescent teammates practised 'nobbling' a fly-half. When their coach, Father Guiunane, finally arrived he called Harris to the sideline. 'I'm utterly appalled,' said the priest puffing hard on his cigarette. 'We'll win this match by fair means or not at all.'

When, on match day, the dreaded Brosnahan trotted out on to the pitch wearing a Number 10 fly-half shirt, 'Harris, a quiet word,' whispered Father Guiunane through a cloud of blue smoke. 'You may continue with your plan.'

CHAPTER ONE

If a farmer fills his barn with grain, he gets mice. If he leaves it empty, he gets actors.

- Bill Vaughan

There is no question that Mildred Harty had a haunting beauty about her. In that first full decade after World War One, her Celtic ancestry brought a shine to her red hair and a perfection to her pale skin, which turned more than her share of Limerick heads. Below her high forehead her soft eyes possessed a quiet confidence. And her tight distinctly Scottish lips and mouth complemented the delicacy of her jawline.

Of course the years had passed down more than a genetic code and a certain, if rather pleasing, physical appearance. Roughly translated from the Gaelic, her family name meant 'descendent of Faghartach', a byname for a noisy and vociferous person. It was a reputation she was quite capable of living up to. But there was also an inherited fire within Mildred's soul, an unshakable family loyalty and religious certainty that would ultimately prove capable of withstanding everything fate and the English could throw at it.

The shy but determined Mildred knew little of the young Ivan Harris when they were first introduced, and then only what Limerick gossip and her own mother had told her. Despite the fact that the Harris family money had helped to found the town's Crescent College, Ivan was sent to England to be educated. After six years at Downside, a Benedictine boarding school attached to Downside Abbey near Bath, Ivan returned to Limerick tall and wiry and ruggedly

handsome. What Mr and Mrs Harty wanted for their daughter was a strong, socially reputable marriage. For Ivan's parents the priority was a good, clean, childbearing Catholic girl to safeguard the future of the Harris dynasty. Love was a secondary consideration.

Years later Mildred's most famous son would ask his mother if she and his father were in love when they married. 'No,' she said. 'We were matchmade.' It was true. Bound by tradition and family responsibility, Mildred Harty and Ivan Harris were brought together by a matchmaker and told to get on with it.

Somewhere in the distant past, Harris's paternal ancestors travelled from England to Ireland. Lieutenants Edward and William Harris were both officers under Cromwell, but there were other Harrises already living in Ireland before the arrival of the Lord Protector's Model Army. Seventeenth-century records show that the penalty for one Harris family's 'treachery' of going over to the Irish was a forfeiture of its lands. In various issues of the *Cork Historical and Architectural Society Journal* there are accounts of the 1722 will of Joseph Harris of Cork. Also of the Harris Affair, 'an account of the death of William Harris as a result of being tossed in a blanket'.

It is not known whether these Harris's - Harris is itself a corruption of the French first name Henri - were related to the Harris family, which, by the early nineteenth century, had settled in Limerick and already begun to amass a business fortune. The first patriarch of public note was James Harris, the actor's great-grandfather. By 1864 James Harris's empire had grown to include not only Limerick's largest flour mill but a company dock and warehouse at Steamboat Quay and a bakery in Henry Street. The family home, Hartstonge House, was rambling and comfortable and richly furnished, with its own private chapel.

An astute businessman, James Harris also appreciated the value of publicity. In the spring of 1868 he came to the

rescue of a French balloonist whose disastrous attempts to depart from the town had caught the public's attention. Monsieur A Chevalier arrived in Limerick during the first week in May. While the aeronaut and showman unpacked his equipment on Steamboat Quay, his assistants toured the city drumming up interest in flights aboard his 'magnificent and novel sailing balloon' *L'Esperance*. 'This remarkable Aerial Machine,' proclaimed his poster, 'is the first of the kind ever constructed; it can be elevated and depressed without discharging gas or ballast, and is especially constructed by Mons. Chevalier (late of Paris) for scientific Aeronautic Observations and the study of the Atmospheric Currents.' Among Chevalier's other claims to fame were that he had remained aloft for two days and nights and travelled more than seven hundred miles with the fellow French balloonist Nadar, and that he had received the Légion d'Honneur 'for the invention of an iron Aerial Machine, which is driven by Steam Power, and ascends in the air without the use of any gas'.

To witness the uncrating and assembly of his balloon, Chevalier charged onlookers a shilling (5 pence) for outer-circle seats and two shillings to watch from a closer enclosure. Those who wished to make 'partial and other ascents' could do so by private arrangement. James Harris, while happy to allow the Frenchman the use of his quayside yard, preferred to keep his feet firmly on the ground. During one test flight, *L'Esperance* was damaged and needed extensive repairs. The delay prompted a flurry of street-corner bets on which Limerick citizen would be brave enough to make an ascent - and whether they would survive.

On 16 May the *Limerick Chronicle* published a letter from Chevalier addressed from the Harris's riverside yard:

Dear Sir,

Allow me to inform the gentry and public of Limerick that the injury sustained during the last inflation is completely repaired, and I intend to perform my promise, weather permitting, by ascending in my balloon on Thursday next, 21st of May, at three o'clock, from Mr Harris' premises, Steamboat Quay, who was kind enough to give me the use of it, free of any charge. The scientific manager, Mr Baker, will give me every facility in his power to secure a successful ascent, and supply the required quantity of gas at high pressure. In this voyage, I will be accompanied by a lady and a gentleman. Hoping to be still favoured with the patronage of the gentry and public of Limerick, who have expressed so much sympathy for my unavoidable accident, and returning them my sincere thanks.

I remain, dear sir,

Your obedient servant,

A. Chevalier.

The *Munster News* reported that Monsieur Chevalier 'ascended at 3.30 p.m. from Mr Harris' yard and was last seen heading for Castleconnell'.

Fiercely loyal, James Harris remained lifelong friends with the colourful Scots-born textile magnate, ship owner and three-times Limerick mayor Sir Peter Tait, who, in less than thirty years, went from rags to riches and back again.

James Harris was a political liberal but also a staunch and devoted Catholic who lost no opportunity in forestalling the ambitions of his Protestant rivals. During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, he was elected secretary of the harbour board and became a markets trustee and a shareholder of the Limerick Race Company. Harris was also a stakeholder in the Catholic-funded citizens' tugboat *Commodore*, which engaged in more than one riverboat war

with its *Privateer* rival, owned by the Protestant families of Bannatyne, Spaight and Russell.

James Harris died in 1895. In his obituary the *Limerick Chronicle* described him as a 'kindly and genial' man who had 'gained himself a host of friends' during his seventy-year life.

There was little chance that the Catholic-Protestant rivalry would be laid to rest with James Harris. When the family firms of Bannatyne and Spaight each announced they were branching out to offer the city's wealthier inhabitants the chance to lease telephones and connect to the expanding national network, the Harris board announced a Catholic competitor. Calls were not cheap: a three-minute connection between Limerick and Dublin cost an exorbitant 1s. 6d. (7½ pence).

By the time Ivan Harris inherited control of the family business in the late 1920s, he and his wife had moved into Overdale, one of Limerick's finest houses. The lifestyle was easy and enjoyable, with maids to keep the huge rooms clean and aired, nannies to look after the ever increasing Harris offspring, and gardeners to look after the large garden. The Harris empire extended to a pan-Ireland chain of flour mills and baking-powder mills and more than two dozen town bakeries. It was an empire that made them jealously rich and powerfully influential. By the time Ivan Harris's third son, Richard, was born on 1 October 1930, it was also a kingdom under fatal attack.

Three-hundred and fifty miles away in London the board of Rank, Britain's biggest flour merchant, voted on a move to corner the Irish market and instructed its managers to destroy the competition at any cost. It was a campaign that would eventually take more than fifteen years to win. One of its first targets was the Harris flour and seed mill in Limerick. Whatever Harris charged Rank undercut. Farmers who stayed loyal were eventually enticed away with still lower prices and under-the-table incentives. 'I saw it all

dwindle,' recalled Richard Harris. 'We went from being rich to being poor.' One by one the servants were let go until Mildred Harris was forced to scrub her own floors and wash the sheets and shirts for her husband and eight children.

Richard Harris's earliest memory is of the 'good and the rich' times. His brother Noel had just been born. When he was little more than a toddler Harris recalls pushing his baby brother's pram down Limerick's Post Office Lane when he asked his mother if he would ever be that age again. 'No, Richard, you won't,' said Mildred Harris.

At one time, Ivan Harris wanted to send all his sons to England to be educated, like him, at Downside. Ireland's independence and the war with Germany made that impossible. World War Two was just a few months old when the Harrises enrolled their son 'Dickie' at Limerick's Crescent College.

Around this time, or very soon afterwards, Harris began to write poetry. At first they were naïve innocent verses scribbled in a spidery child's hand on scraps of paper or 'illegally' into his school notebooks. As he moved into adolescence - which he always claimed came exceptionally early - he experimented with various styles of handwriting. The subject matter never changed. The poems were a personal and private literature that the young Harris never read aloud or shared with his parents or seven brothers and sisters. By the time he was twelve he was recording his days and experiences in a kind of sing-song shorthand.

Like his mother Harris was an instinctive and intuitive hoarder: he later claimed he had squirrelled away every poem just in case, one day, he could make money from them. Ivan Harris's advice was more down to earth. 'Invest in property,' he advised his children in turn. 'That way when take you a piss at least you're pissing on your own land.'

'In Our Greenhouse' - later published in his first collection of poems called *I, In the Membership of My Days* - was written sometime in late 1942. It describes the magic of

fantasy every child sprinkles on its surroundings, in the young Harris's case the garden at Overdale: of playing Tarzan in the apple tree with Sally, a neighbour's daughter who would later become his first teenage girlfriend; of escaping man-eating crocodiles by climbing the branches of an overhanging plum tree; of hoisting his sister's knickers on the washing pole as a white surrender flag; of playing James Cagney, with whom he would later act, and being executed for his crimes on the makeshift electric chair of the outside toilet. In 'our lane' behind the house the boys would collect old rags to scrunch and tie into a rugby ball and Harris would dream of leading a victorious Ireland against England. And then there was his father's car, which successively became a bomber to blitz the Germans, a destroyer he captained on his hunt for submarines, and an armoured car to chase the enemy. 'My brother died five times. He said I was lousy shot, but the truth was he was a bad loser.'

Tall for his age and with a crop of hair that already shared a stubborn individuality with the nine-year-old head beneath, young Dickie Harris plunged into the Crescent College regime with notable indifference. The school was owned and staffed by Jesuit fathers, an educated and severe order that interpreted any fleeting lack of concentration as a lapse in devotion – and an outright refusal to learn as a mortal sin. Salvation, as the Crescent's latest pupil soon found, could be achieved only through suffering. The spiritual weapon the fathers found most redeeming was a vicious leather strap.

'A grammatical mistake in homework, or a moment of foolishness in class, and the good father would write out a little chit from his docket book,' recalls the television and radio presenter Terry Wogan in his autobiography *Is It Me?*. 'Depending on the seriousness of the error or transgression, that chit would be good for three or six heavy welts across the hand from a reinforced leather strap.' Each lunchtime

and afternoon a queue of boys would assemble to receive their 'biffs' from the college prefect of studies. Only the brightest and the most diligent escaped.

Others found the Crescent regime less brutal. Bill Whelan, creator of the *Riverdance* spectacular, who would later owe his breakthrough as a composer to Richard Harris, attended the college between 1957 and 1968. 'Of course we got the odd slap at school but there was nothing extreme in my opinion,' claims Whelan. 'I am always amazed at how former pupils exaggerate their memories of the Crescent punishment.'

In the classroom, Harris found little to interest him. Most subjects were barely tolerable; the rest he gave up on. He was not alone. Much against the Jesuit tradition of learning and academic excellence, Crescent College created a special class for its 'eleven hopeless cases', of which Harris was one. Expelling or arranging for the pupils to be transferred to another academy would have been seen as an admission of failure. To hide its collective shame, the school denied the class's existence – to the other pupils and their parents – even ordering that no written record be kept of its presence. On paper, the boys took their places each day alongside the other pupils in their year. In reality, they shuffled into a classroom at the far end of a long corridor, where their rebellious minds could be contained in a form of academic quarantine.

For the 'forgotten few' examinations were as boring and worthless as the learning they were designed to test. During one end-of-term examination, Harris waited until the papers had been distributed before folding his into a neat row of paper houses; when that was done, he put his head on the desk and fell asleep.

At the end of one Christmas term Harris returned home with his school report. Ivan opened the buff envelope with accustomed resignation. Opposite the list of printed subjects each teacher had written his son's end-of-term mark:

mathematics – 2; French – 1; geography – 2; algebra – 0. The accumulated total failed to reach the 40 per cent pass mark for a single subject.

At the bottom of the report was a tear-off slip on which parents were expected to add their own comments. Ivan unscrewed the cap of his prized Parker pen and wrote, 'Dear Father McClaughlin, I am very pleased with my son Dickie's progress at your school.'

One apocryphal story still doing the Limerick rounds involves an American journalist collecting material for a magazine feature on the now-famous Richard Harris. Having spoken to his family and friends, the journalist made an appointment with the Crescent College head. The head was polite but insistent: 'I would prefer it if you did not mention him in connection with this school.'

There were two subjects in which Harris excelled. Both took place outside the confines of regular classroom routine and both remained his absorbing passions for the rest of his life.

'As a family we were great singers,' Harris once said. 'Not in the professional sense, but music and singing were always in their hearts.' At school – in the great wood-lined hall – Harris's gregarious nature thrived amid the chaos of school plays. His performance in the William Vincent Wallace opera *Maritana* won him a standing ovation. And in his early twenties he earned equal praise at the Victoria Hotel's impromptu concerts for his delivery of a long sequence from *On the Waterfront*, complete with American accent and Marlon Brando's threatening whisper.

Since he was a child, as soon as he could walk and almost certainly as soon as he could pick up and run with a ball, Harris also became fanatical about rugby – 'My dream was always that I would play for Ireland.' It was an ambition that slotted in well with the ethos of Crescent College, which honoured its rugby team members with special treatment

and extra privileges – not that he saw much of those. What it did give Richard Harris was sex appeal and hero status.

For some, Limerick would remain the ‘last bollard on the dark edge of Europe’. It was the furthest place from which to travel. Only the desperate and the bravest travelled west to America. The rebellious and the ambitious turned their backs on the Atlantic and headed east to Dublin, and then, if you really had nothing to lose, to London.

‘Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain,’ recalled Frank McCourt in his memoir *Angela’s Ashes*. Fifty years on, Harris would have a violent and highly publicised dispute with the Pulitzer Prize-winning author over their differing memories of childhood Limerick, but the one thing they would never fight over was the weather. ‘Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year’s Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks . . . The rain drove us into the church – our refuge, our strength, our only dry place.’

Harris was growing up in what was then Ireland’s third-largest town. Limerick did not qualify as a city because it did not have a cathedral. What it did have were dozens of churches, all Roman Catholic and all providing that strange complexity of fear and faith that only Catholicism engenders. ‘Limerick was more Roman Catholic than the Vatican,’ recalls Terry Wogan. ‘Not a lot of Christianity, if by that you mean love and tolerance of your fellow man, but plenty of religion.’

Whether you were poor and hungry and sharing a two-room slum behind St John’s Castle or, like Wogan, born into a comfortable lower-middle-class family from Elm Park, the Church permeated your house, your clothes, even the air you breathed. And, unlike the smell of warm sugar from

Cleeves Toffee Factory on the Ennis Road, it could not be blown away by the sharp Atlantic storms or washed clean by what seemed like Limerick's ceaseless rain.

For the town's few wealthy families, such as the Harrises and those with ambition enough to claw their way up the financial and social ladder, the Church was eager to help. 'They had something called the "Arch-Confraternity", a sort of Catholic Freemasonry, except that there was secrecy,' explains Wogan in his autobiography, *Is It Me?* 'If you got into the Arch-Confraternity, you let the whole of Limerick know about it. You had arrived: a pillar of the Church, a pillar of the community; people bought you drinks and paid your fare on the bus.'

There was little, if any, contact between the Harris and the Wogan families. Unlike Ivan Harris, Michael Wogan was not a member of the Arch-Confraternity, a situation the presenter attributes to his father's impish sense of humour. Terry Wogan was born in August 1938 and for six years, while his father managed Leverette & Frye, one of the town's more upmarket food emporiums, he remained an only child.

Limerick's divisions, recalled one of Harris's friends, Desmond O'Grady, ran deep and through almost every aspect of the city's business and social life. 'It was a caste-divided city of Catholics and Protestants, urbanites and suburbanites, Laurel Hill and Presentation girls, Jesuit and Christian Brother boys. The rugby, rowing and church clubs were equally divided,' explained O'Grady.

Only one thing could be guaranteed to unite this deeply divided society, either on the blood-spattered grass of Thomond Park or against a wider enemy. Limerick, as Harris explained many years later in an American documentary, is the home of rugby. 'Not only in Ireland, but throughout the world. Rugby is sacred on these streets. To say anything against rugby on these streets will get you into very serious trouble.'

Rugby was not only almost a religion in itself – whereby you were baptised by being taken to a match and held aloft to celebrate a try before your first birthday – but was also organised into traditional religious areas. Limerick's junior teams were based and recruited from parish boundaries, allowing players to defend not only their championship ranking but also their neighbourhood honour. Junior matches, like interschool clashes, were bloody and hard and desperately serious.

By his late teens Harris was already fourteen stone and an athletic six foot one. Much of his school rugby career was spent packing down as a rebellious and wandering lock, though 'I was too busy and knackered scoring tries to bother too much with scrummaging.' It was, he claims, his first case of miscasting.

Harris's dedication to rugby – and to *winning* at rugby – received some unusual benefaction. In 1947 Crescent College met PBC Cork in the final of the Munster Schools Senior Cup. Harris was forced to watch the impressive but indecisive match from the sidelines. Before the replay, one of Crescent's forwards left the college to start work and Harris, still only sixteen, was called into the team alongside his older brother Ivan. The danger player in the Cork side was a full-back named Mick Brosnahan, who Harris had a hunch would turn out in the fly-half position. For three hours each day Harris and his Crescent teammates practised 'nobbling' a fly-half. When their coach, Father Guinane, finally arrived he called Harris to the sideline. 'I'm utterly appalled,' said the priest puffing hard on his cigarette. 'We'll win this match by fair means or not at all.'

When, on match day, the dreaded Brosnahan trotted out on to the pitch wearing a Number 10 fly-half shirt, 'Harris, a quiet word,' whispered Father Guinane through a cloud of blue smoke. 'You may continue with your plan.'

After leaving Crescent College, Harris played for the old boys' team, Old Crescent, before joining Garryowen Rugby

Club, which trained and played on the Thomond Park Rugby grounds. With Harris in the Garryowen squad, the team went on to win the Munster Senior Cup. Harris wore his injuries like badges of honour and revelled in his invincible fitness. He was, he boasted, a gladiator on the battlefield of Thomond Park – where he scored eleven tries in various junior and schools games.

Feared for his unforgiving tackles, Harris did not, however, always get things his own way. One member of St Mary's Rugby Club squad was a no-nonsense player called Ducky Hayes. Taking the field for his school's old boys' side, Harris made the mistake of clashing with Hayes head-on. Semiconscious and with his face covered in blood, Harris was stretchered off the Thomond Park pitch and treated in the casualty department of the nearby City Home Hospital.

'A few minutes later he was back,' recalled Hayes. 'All you could see were the slits of his eyes, his face was bandaged so much.' The crowd greeted the reappearance of Old Crescent's star player with shouts of: 'Tis the return of the Phantom – no, 'tis the Mummy.'

In 1945, a new culture swept the streets and bars and back alleys of Limerick. With World War Two over, Ireland was released from its declaration of neutrality, and Shannon Airport, fifteen miles up the Ennis Road from Limerick, became a major staging post for American troops on their way to and from occupied Germany. For the seven-year-old Terry Wogan 'it brought new sounds, new flavours, the almighty dollar, and a sinful touch of forbidden fruit to Holy Catholic Limerick'. To Harris the drawling, gum-chewing, back-slapping B-movie cowboys and gangsters he had so carefully watched at Saturday afternoon cinema came alive – and he was desperate to be one of them.

By his early teens Harris and his cohorts Paddy Lloyd and Gerry Murphy were doing a weekly round of the town's five cinemas. Each visit to the Carlton or the Lyric or the Savoy –

which still offered an intermission speciality act and fifteen minutes of Wurlitzer singalong – was governed less by that day's feature film than by a recent misdemeanour and the length of a subsequent manager's ban. With money short, the trio would pool their resources to buy a single ticket. As the lights dimmed for the start of the programme the ticket holder, usually Harris, would slip out of his seat and help his friends in through the fire exit or toilet window. His departures were equally ingenious and considerably more public. After watching a screen cowboy tumble to his death at the Savoy, Harris emulated the dead villain by hurling himself head first down the cinema's sweeping staircase. At the Lyric, Marlon Brando's Oscar-nomination performance in *Julius Caesar* so impressed him he began to echo the star's lines out loud – 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears . . .' When Harris started to get more laughs than Shakespeare's tragedy the manager decided it was time to call the Garda and Harris was frogmarched, still reciting, from the premises.

Limerick's newest cinema opened on 17 November 1947, and within a few weeks would present the teenage Harris with one of his first entrepreneurial opportunities. Converted from the city's old Athenaeum Hall, the six-hundred-seat Royal opened with Cole Porter's hit musical *Night and Day*, starring Cary Grant and Jane Wyman. Its new owner, Mary Collins, intended her cinema to be the grandest and plushest of Limerick's nine such establishments and staffed by 'knowledgeable and caring' assistants. As commissionaire, she hired a six-foot-six ex-army boxing champion called Denis Hayes, who had appeared as an equestrian stuntman in Lawrence Olivier's epic *Henry V* and cherished a personal note of thanks from the actor-director.

Dressed in his elegant maroon and gold uniform, Hayes soon earned a reputation as the city's leading authority on cinema matters and show-business gossip. During performances, it was part of his duty to patrol the balcony

and attempt to halt the cascade of Cleeves toffee wrappers and other more dangerous missiles aimed at the patrons in the more expensive seats below. His job was not helped by gangs of rampaging youngsters abandoned by their older siblings while they 'shifted' their latest date in the darkened back rows. At the start of one matinée performance, Hayes wanted some help, and approached a youth who appeared to share his interest in films.

'You can guard the balcony for half an hour, young man,' said Hayes, 'while I slip out for cigarettes.'

'For half-price next Sunday?' offered the teenager.

Hayes agreed and slipped out through the fire exit and across the road into Collin's pub. When he returned, everyone in the balcony was sitting bolt upright: 'The only thing I could hear was the hum of the projector and the occasional sob from a red-eared kid,' he recalled. His partnership with the 'young pup' continued until Richard Harris left for London.

On his own, Harris took films far more seriously. 'I often went to the cinema and stayed all day,' he later confessed. 'I would go in for the matinée, stay for the middle show and leave after the evening performance.'

For the town's motorists, the longer Harris stayed indoors and off the roads the better. Not long after passing his driving test he made spectacular contact with a corporation bus. When he somehow managed to repeat the incident he was summonsed and fined and banned from driving for life. He never drove a car again.

At seventeen, and like his older brothers before him, Harris left school and joined the family firm. The flour mill at Mount Kenneth was barely making a profit, certainly not enough to support a third and hungrier generation of Harrises. It was an opportunity, the company's latest recruit explained to his new employer, for him to break with family tradition. He wanted to do something else. Anything else. He certainly

didn't want to learn the benefits and failings of various strains of wheat or to master the intricacies of double-entry bookkeeping. At home there were rows and hurtful accusations. In the end, Harris agreed to follow his siblings into the firm – but pushing a broom instead of a pen.

There was barely enough work in the Mount Kenneth flour lofts to keep Harris occupied. What there *were* plenty of were mice and rats. At first Harris used a stick to shoo away the vermin. When he acquired an air rifle he hid among the sacks and sniped at the foraging rodents.

Sean Leonard was a Limerick teenager who remembers his contemporary's mischievous sense of humour. Leonard was employed in his uncle's butcher's shop about seventy yards up the road from the Harrises' flour mill. 'Always full of talk and craic', Harris would first admonish the butcher for allowing a queue to form, and then push his way behind the counter, pick up a knife or cleaver and announce, 'Right you are, who's for two pound of round?'

Mary O'Meara's family owned and ran a small grocery shop in Bellinacurra, about a mile and a half outside the city. She remembers Harris as 'tall and carefree and gay' and always with a pretty young woman on his arm. 'Everyone knew Dickie Harris,' adds O'Meara. 'Even at that age he was a rugby hero to a lot of people. If Dickie wasn't playing that week some of my friends wouldn't bother going to the match. We all expected him to one day play for Ireland, he was that good.' Once a week she would drive the family's Commer van into Limerick to collect sacks of flour and rolled oats from Ivan Harris's store in Henry Street. 'An eight-stone sack of flour was nothing to Dickie,' recalls Mary O'Meara. 'He would toss the sack over his shoulder and skip his way to the van before hurling it in the back.'

By early 1948, though, the Rank stranglehold on the flour business was proving ruinous. The Harris business, which at one time had been one of area's largest employers, was haemorrhaging money daily. Ivan Harris informed his wife,

but not his family, that he was thinking of closing the remaining mill and taking a lease on a small Limerick shop. From there he could at least earn a living selling flour direct to the public and other retailers. The end, when it came, was triggered by mischievous disloyalty from Ivan's own troublesome son.

Weary of sweeping floors and shooting rats, Harris persuaded his fellow mill workers they were being poorly paid and that the only solution was to strike for higher wages. Surprised by the militancy of his workforce, many of whom he had grown up with and knew as friends, Ivan arrived at his riverside premises one morning to be confronted by a wall of strikers brandishing banners that announced, 'Your son says we should have more money!'

Years later Harris would use the story as a piece of interview self-mockery. It was, claims one of his near relatives, 'the biggest single act of treachery Dickie performed on his family. It may not have killed off the business, but it was certainly one of the final nails in the coffin. Ivan was bitterly hurt.' It took almost a decade for Harris, by then an Oscar-nominated actor, to redress the balance.

Beneath the window of Harris's Overdale bedroom was a galvanised tin roof. It was his escape route for the nights when Ivan Harris forbade his troublesome son to go out. And, shimmying up an overhanging tree, he would remove his shoes before clambering barefooted back into his room from an all-night date.

During the summer before his 22nd birthday, Harris noticed that the climb left him unusually breathless. He dismissed it as the start of another summer cold. The infection dragged on for days, leaving him tired and chesty and soaked by nightly sweats. When he began coughing up blood his mother called the doctor.

Tuberculosis was a legacy of the crowded and unsanitary living conditions that still existed in many Irish cities in the early 1950s. Not only was it considered a fatal disease, but recovery for those who did survive could take as long as three years and patients were invariably admitted to an isolation hospital. For those left at home the stigma of having a family member in a sanatorium was almost as embarrassing as the disease itself. It was a burden Mildred Harris was not prepared to bear. Her son would be confined to his bedroom and treated at home.

The trickle of friends brave enough to visit the invalid eventually dried up and Harris, frustrated by his physical condition and uneasy about the curb on his rugby ambitions, was left to find his own distractions. His imagination roamed and rebounded about the room. The light bulb became his captive and the door and dresser knobs his servants. 'I would have conversations with inanimate objects,' he recalled, 'and invent hundreds of people who trooped through my room and spoke to me as they went.' He was a castaway; a highwayman; a red Indian; the king of England; the Pope. In his mind – from within his mind – came instant sin and instant absolution.

He read and reread a copy of *Hamlet*. It filled him first with excitement and possibility and then, as he paced his bedroom reciting the lines, it swelled the room itself with a special kind of magic. 'Hamlet is a part which can be compared to a man given a pistol, blindfolded and told to fire it off in a room completely papered with targets,' the veteran classical actor Ralph Richardson once said. 'If he goes bang, bang, bang, he'll hit three targets.' Harris fired off stray shots – 'O shame! where is thy blush?' – at whoever came into his room.

Harris also began searching inwards in a self-search that he once mentioned had never stopped, and as his guide he chose the tortured genius of Vincent van Gogh. Since the Dutch painter's suicide in 1890 almost eight hundred books

and articles and theses had appeared around the world. In van Gogh's letters the 23-year-old Harris found endless inspiration:

To act well in this world one must sacrifice all personal desires. Man is not on this earth merely to be happy, nor even simply to be honest. He is there to realise great things for humanity, to attain nobility and to surmount the vulgarity of nearly every individual.

And advice: 'Don't take things that don't really concern you very closely too much to heart, and don't let them hit you too hard.'

And, possibly for the first time in his life, he also found a shared suffering. In 1879 van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo:

If I had to believe that I were troublesome to you or to the people at home, or were in your way, of no good to anyone, and if I should be obliged to feel an intruder or an outcast, so that I were better off dead, and if I should have to try to keep out of your way more and more - if I thought this were really the case, a feeling of anguish would overwhelm me, and I should have to struggle against despair . . .

Unlike van Gogh, Harris never felt the need to take his own life. Harris's 'suicide' was escape - from the same feeling of entrapment he sensed closing in when his father demanded he should work in the flour mill office. 'There were six boys and two girls in the family,' Harris explained years later. 'I was lost in the middle and when the tuberculosis eased off I was left with an identity crisis. I was free to become something, but what? I chose acting partly because I knew I would have to create an identity for them to recognise; I wasn't just child number five. I wanted them