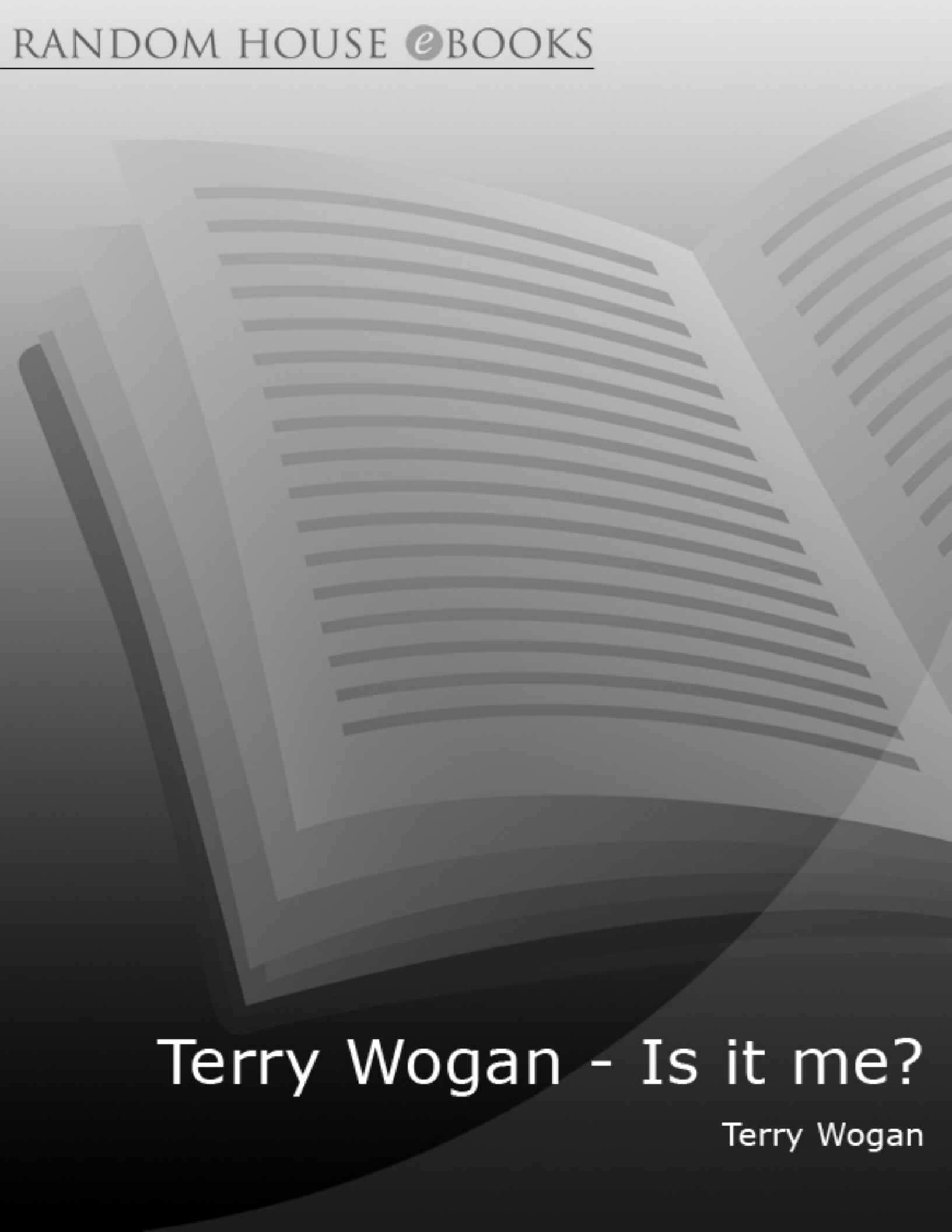


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Terry Wogan - Is it me?

Terry Wogan

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

ONE: Growing up in Limerick

TWO: Occasions of Sin

THREE: From Shannon's Side to Liffey's Shore

FOUR: Of Sport and Stars

FIVE: The Manager, the Porter and the Upstairs Chop

SIX: Don't Give up the Day Job!

SEVEN: So Much to Say, So Little Time to Say it

EIGHT: On Blowing a Tinker off his Missus

NINE: The Great Leap Forward

TEN: Wogan's Winners

ELEVEN: 'Britain's Best-Known'

TWELVE: That'll Do

Picture Section

Index

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

Terry Wogan has been clinging to the wreckage for so long now, you'd think he'd do the decent thing and silently steal away. Not likely...

Unaided and, indeed, unbidden, comes this forbidding tome - his latest cry for attention. From unremarkable childhood to a chequered career as a bank clerk, from the Cattle Market Report on Irish Radio to the appalling excesses of the *Eurovision Song Contest*, no stone is left unturned, no unsavoury detail spared. Has the man no shame?

About the Author

Born under a cloud in Limerick, Ireland, Terry Wogan and his family moved, one hour ahead of the posse, to Dublin in the 1950s. His first job was in a bank, but he was soon found out, and took refuge in a deserted studio in Irish Radio. Later, he sent a back-to-front tape to the BBC, and, out of pity, they gave him a job. Sadly, he's been hanging around ever since on British radio and television, and appears to have been doing the breakfast show on BBC Radio 2 since God was a boy. He claims to have almost 8 million listeners, but you'll never hear anyone admit it in public. In a moment of weakness, in December 2005, Her Majesty the Queen honoured him with a knighthood.

Is it me?

TERRY WOGAN

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BBC
BOOKS

*To Helen,
Alan, Mark and Katherine -
my life*

ONE

GROWING UP IN LIMERICK

MICHAEL THOMAS WOGAN - THE 'DA' - was born in Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, in 1900. Enniskerry was widely regarded as Ireland's prettiest village, and Wicklow the garden of Ireland. Unfortunately, you cannot eat the scenery, and times were hard for young Michael Thomas and his family of an elder brother, two older sisters, a mother whom he adored and a father he never talked about.

The Da's father was a builder with a tidy little business that he drank away in the time-honoured Irish paternal manner. There may have been more or less to it than that, but my father avoided the topic all his life, just as he avoided Enniskerry, lovely an' all as it was.

For an intelligent, sensitive young man, the place left a lot to be desired. Apart from a boorish, drunken bully of a father, there was the parochial nature of the little town. The bank manager, police sergeant, schoolteacher and parish priest were the ruling junta. You tipped your hat to them, and crossed them at your peril.

There was one bigger fish in the pond: the local lord of the manor. Powerscourt was one of the largest, lushest, most beautiful estates in all of Ireland, not to mind Co. Wicklow. It still is. You go there to admire the beautiful Italianate gardens, and the ruin of a once-imposing great house - the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, at the peak of their form. I doubt if my father ever bothered to go there to gasp in admiration. He probably would not have been allowed

past the gate. As it was, he was not too thrilled at having to step off the pavement in deference to Lord Powerscourt's passing, whenever His Lordship deigned to grace Enniskerry with his august presence.

According to himself, the Da walked barefoot to school, at least twenty-five miles a day, and uphill both ways. The teacher was no more a favourite of his than his father or Lord Powerscourt. The lack of books, writing materials and, indeed, paper, meant that lessons on the blackboard were transferred by the pupils on to their slates, with bits of chalk - not the best way of accumulating knowledge. One day, Michael Thomas Wogan let fly the slate at the teacher's head, and that was the end of that.

My father always left me with the impression that all this happened when he was about five years of age, but since he could read, write in a fine hand, and add up with the best of them, I suppose we must take all that with a pinch of salt. Where he learned to read music, sing in a manly baritone and play the violin, he never vouchsafed to me. Probably by osmosis, the way *I've* learned the little I know ...

TYING UP TALENTS

It was more a bag of sugar than a pinch of salt, when himself was packed off to learn the arcane art of the grocer and victualler in the town of Bray, about ten miles away from his home, on the coast. I have no idea how old he was, probably no more than fourteen, when he became a grocer's curate. He quickly mastered the difficult skills entailed, and it was his proud boast that when it came to tying up a bag of sugar, he had no equal.

I obviously inherited the tying-up talent, because, years later, while clerking in the Royal Bank of Ireland, Phibsborough, Dublin, it was my task to tie up old lodgement documents and seal them. What happened to

them after that I cannot tell you, not being senior enough to be told more than was good for me. Anyway, my knotting and sealing reached such heights that the bank manager, Dudley Robertson, called me into his office to compliment me:

‘Wogan!’ he barked in his gravelly voice. ‘Good work!’

I blushed prettily.

‘Always remember,’ he continued, his little feet, in their children’s sandals, peeping out from beneath his desk, ‘always remember: there’s no business like show-business. And there’s no people like show-people. They laugh when other people cry ...’

This cameo of heartless, hard-as-nails show-people is one I shall carry to the grave. What it had to do with tying up lodgement dockets remains a mystery. Perhaps if I had continued to pursue my career with the Royal Bank of Ireland, my confusion might have been lifted. Indeed, my foolishness in not continuing with the bank-clerking was brought home forcefully to me, some years ago. I had left the service of the dear old bank some fifteen years previously, and, in the intervening years, had enjoyed success, fame and all that other stuff, firstly on television and radio in Ireland, and then extraordinarily enough in Britain.

On a visit to Dublin, I called in at a branch of the Royal Bank, or, as it had become, Allied Irish Banks, to get some cash. Lo and behold, there, behind the cashier’s grille, was a face I recognized from the quondam days. Perhaps we had played in the same rugby team, or drank a Saturday night away together in the Bankers’ Club.

‘There y’are,’ he greeted me, as if we had never been apart. ‘How’s it goin’?’

‘Not bad,’ says I, modestly, ‘you know, I’ve been lucky.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ says your man. ‘Y’know, you left the bank at the wrong time. D’you remember Mick Murtagh?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, hesitantly, ‘I think he joined the bank at the same time as me.’

‘He did, right enough. And now look at him: deputy manager in Timoleague! Snug as a bug in a rug ...’

I left, chastened. What a fool I had been, to throw over the permanent, pensionable position. To be snug in Timoleague ... Perhaps even courting a well-set-up farmer’s daughter ... Made for life ... Ah, well ...

It reminds me of two of our best friends, Kits and Hacker Browning. He is the only, much-loved son of the late, great Dame Daphne du Maurier, of *Rebecca*, *Frenchman’s Creek*, ‘The Birds’ (in *Kiss Me Again, Stranger*), ‘Don’t Look Now’, and many another literary triumph. His father was hardly less distinguished: General ‘Boy’ Browning, Commander of the Paras at Arnhem (a bridge too far, sir), the handsomest man in the British Army, and, at the time of Kits’ marriage to Hacker, Treasurer to HRH Prince Philip.

Hacker, or Olive White, to give her her maiden name, was of humbler circumstances. Her father was a carpenter, and she had been a shop-girl, before her beauty brought her to the attention of photographers and model agencies. She worked with my wife Helen as a model in London, and won the Miss Ireland title.

Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) gave her the onerous task of hostess on its most popular quiz-show, *Jackpot*, which was hosted by yours truly: the bank clerk who left too soon. It was a none-too-taxing game for cheap and cheerful prizes – in many ways it prepared me for the depths and degradation of *Blankety Blank* – and it involved a wheel of fortune, from which the unfortunate contestants could select their chosen subject.

It was the task of the hostess to turn this wheel. ‘Spin the Wheel, Olive!’ became the nation’s catch-phrase: not much to write home about, I will grant you, but those were the early days of Irish television, and it was the first chance the

Irish public had to grow their own media heroes and heroines.

Olive White was one of the first, and on the day that she married Kits Browning, in a church on the Dublin Quays, the church itself and the surrounding streets were jammed with an excited throng. Dame Daphne and the good General were bemused, ignored, and delighted with it all. The streets rang to shouts of 'God bless you, Olive!', 'Isn't she gorgeous?' and 'The image of her mother!' But the comment that tickled the good Dame's fancy, and the one she loved to recount, was from an old biddy who she saw turn to a friend, and with a shake of her shawlie head, say: 'Ah, she'll never want for nothin', no more.'

FAMILY MATTERS

We left Michael Thomas Wogan tying up bags of sugar and sleeping above the shop in Bray, Co. Wicklow. Bray was another place that if my father never saw again he would think it too soon, so I take it that his memories of the old spot were not too hot. In the way that we all get wrapped up in ourselves from an early age, I never taxed him too closely about his early years, his steady climb from grocer's assistant, to his quantum leap to work in the select emporium of Leverette & Frye, Grafton Street, Dublin, where he met and courted Rose Byrne, who was working upstairs on the books.

Would that I could tell you more of the courtship, engagement and eventual marriage of Michael and Rose, but I never probed - don't ask me why. We needed a sister, my brother Brian and I. She would have found out the details, in all their romantic glory. It's a girl thing - at least if my daughter Katherine is anything to go by. She left no stone unturned in her relentless pursuit of what she saw as the timeless grand passion that was the love-story of her mother and me.

From the time she was old enough to talk, Katherine conducted a relentless third-degree inquisition on her parents' romance. How did we meet? When? Where? Why? How did we feel? Was it love at first sight? This last question was a particular favourite of my daughter's, and would come up at virtually every family meal-time. She loved to hear her mother say: 'Yes! Across a crowded room ...' and then go into details with which I will not trouble you, in case you are trying to digest something.

Michael Wogan was well into his thirties, and a good ten years older than Rose Byrne, when they married, with George, a friend of his, as best man, and Auntie May, my mother's favourite sister, as bridesmaid. It was a quietly cheerful family affair, with the reception held in Granny Byrne's front parlour, on Cloniffe Road, Drumcondra, Dublin. It can't have been a big affair: the room, as I remember it, was about 12 feet by 15 feet and housed a piano, a three-piece suite and the obligatory china cabinet. Cats were swung at your peril.

Rose Byrne was born to Frank and 'Muds' Byrne, the third of five daughters, in an army barracks in Belfast. The bold Frank was a sergeant, possibly a sergeant-major, in the British Army. There is a picture of him wearing an MP's (Military Policeman's) armband, and the rest is a closed book.

Was he young enough to fight in the trenches of World War One? Was he old enough for the Boer War? Why did I never ask? Why did nobody ever tell me? Why can't I remember my grandmother's real first name? 'Muds', that's what they called her. Frank is a hazy, happy memory, with a waxed moustache. I can't have been more than three, when he died. Muds lived longer, long enough to see me married if she had been strong enough to come to the wedding.

After the wedding, we stopped at Cloniffe Road to see her. She was weak, spent and frail, but she sat up, held our hands and smiled. Nobody has ever smiled like Muds,

except, perhaps, my daughter. It was a smile that lit up Drumcondra, not to mind 207 Cloniffe Road. It was not a huge Mary Tyler Moore-like American number to make a horse whinny in envy, but an Irish granny's smile, one that took over her whole face, lighting up the eyes with a twinkling delight – the kindest thing I have ever seen.

I have been very lucky – I have been surrounded by kind, gentle, good-humoured women all my life. 'Muds' – short for mother – was possessed of such a gentle, beautiful soul that you couldn't but love her, and her five daughters did, deeply, abidingly. Maybe it's a loving grandson's rose-tinted contact lenses, but I never heard Muds raise her voice in anger, nor anyone ever raise theirs to her.

Maybe it is because of the loving kindness with which she surrounded them that only two of the Byrne sisters ever married: my mother and her younger sister, Dinah. What names! Nellie, May, Rose, Kitty and Dinah – like whispers from another century. And not forgetting Auntie Maggie – she was Muds's elder sister, a formidable maiden lady, the very antithesis of her sister: tall, erect, unbending, unsmiling and not at all keen on human contact.

She dressed entirely in black from hat to shoes, and I am sure that bombazine came into it a good deal. She always seemed hundreds of years old to me, but she can't have been. She was a career woman – a French-polisher – and, like my Aunties' names, there are not many of *them* left, these days. As a matter of fact, Auntie Kitty followed Great-Aunt Mag into the French-polishing, and became a dab hand. Auntie Dinah followed my mother into the cash-books of Leverette & Frye. Auntie May, my godmother, worked in Veritas, the Catholic Truth Society bookshop.

Censorship was the Roman Catholic order of the day, and Auntie May was part of the vetting procedure. As I grew into adolescence, many's the racy novel I discovered, after rigorous searching in Auntie May's bedroom. Not that you had to be all that outrageous to fall foul of the Irish censor.

James Joyce had not been seen for years and D.H. Lawrence could only be guessed at. The way things were, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was lucky to get in under the razor wire.

If I owe my literacy to anybody, apart from the sainted Michael and Rose, I owe it to Auntie May. Throughout my childhood and early adolescence, she kept me supplied with books, comics and magazines, that opened a new, different and wider world for a boy living in a parochial, narrow-minded town in the south-west of Ireland.

Her parcels would arrive every Friday without fail: *Beano*, *Dandy*, *Wizard* and *Champion*, *Film and Radio Fun*, and, later on, the miracle of shiny colour that was the *Eagle*. Every couple of weeks, a new book: progressing from *Doctor Dolittle* to *The Wind in the Willows*, on to *Just William* and *Billy Bunter*, to *Bulldog Drummond* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, my dear Auntie May inculcated in me a love of books and reading that has never left me, and has given me a breadth of vocabulary and general knowledge that I could never have otherwise reached.

Auntie Nellie was in curtains in Clery's, Dublin's premier department store, in O'Connell Street. Nellie was the eldest of the Byrne girls and utterly unlike the others. She got the Great-Aunt Mag genes, I'm afraid. Humourless, unsmiling, she had a deep distrust of anything in trousers, including little boys. 'Men!' she said to my mother once. 'They're only after the one thing!' 'And how would you know?' riposted the Ma, who always had the sharpest tongue and the keenest wit in 207 Cloniffe Road, Drumcondra.

I don't think Auntie Nellie had ever been kissed, much less put in a position to defend her honour. She had a friend, Nellie Nolan, as formidable as herself - tall, severe, given to hats.

As I remember, there were a lot of hats around then, on men as well as women. There is a remarkable picture of Michael Collins addressing a huge crowd outside the

General Post Office, Dublin, in 1921, and there is not a bare head in sight. Twenty-five years on, in the 1940s, and the hat still held sway in Dublin. 'Here's your hat and what's your hurry?' was a well-worn method of moving an unwelcome guest right along.

I don't remember a surfeit of liquor lapping around the place whenever I visited my granny in Dublin. The cup of tea, that was the favoured libation. Indeed, I am sure I am right in saying that there was more tea drunk in Ireland per head of population than anywhere else in the world at that time, including England, traditional heartland of Mazawattee, orange pekoe and Earl Grey.

It was a comfort to a nation that hadn't much else. The old Irish countrywoman's saying: 'Ah, sure, what is there left to us, except the cup o' tea, and itself ...' ('itself' being the 'one thing' that my Auntie Nellie was convinced all men were after) had a ring of truth about it.

Nellie Nolan liked a cup of tea as well as the next woman, but, occasionally, she would ask for a glass of water. 'And let the tap run, Nell!' she would admonish. It became a catchphrase between my mother and me. 'Let the tap run, Nell!' Mind, there was method in Nell's admonition. The taps were lead, and it wasn't a bad idea to let a little lead poisoning run off, before you filled your glass with 'Adam's Ale'.

Nellie Byrne and Nellie Nolan holidayed together, in Britain and Europe, and in the year I was born, 1938, visited Germany. My father, no great fan of Auntie Nellie, any more than schoolteachers, Bray, Enniskerry and Lord Powerscourt, was of the firm opinion that this visit, if not the direct cause of the Second World War, was certainly a contributory factor. He always called Auntie Nellie the 'Magpie', believing her to be a harbinger of ill fate, if not doom itself.

Frank Byrne, Nellie's dad, was against the visit of the two Nellies to Hitler's Reich, largely on the basis of my good

Auntie's appearance. She was small and dark, with circles under her eyes, and Frank was convinced she would be arrested on arrival by the Waffen S.S. as a Jew. Luckily, it didn't happen, but the two Nellies did attend a Nazi Rally, where the mass audience was addressed by Martin Bormann. Someone took a pot-shot at the bold Martin, apparently, and the meeting broke up in disorder, at least according to my Auntie Nellie. Perhaps if she could have hung around Germany a bit longer, she might have had the necessary disruptive influence, and nipped the Third Reich in the bud, before it really got going.

CULINARY 'DELIGHTS'

I spent almost as much of my childhood in Muds's house in Dublin, as I did at home in Limerick. Summer holidays in Irish schools were always three months long, with almost a month at Christmas and a couple of weeks at Easter. Oft my mother and I would pop on the train, up to the Big City, leaving the tireless, dutiful Michael to labour alone among the hams, jams and other comestibles of Limerick's finest victualler.

I loved these visits. Who wouldn't? For six years, until, against all expectations, my brother Brian turned up, I had the individual attention and affection of a granny, three maiden aunts and a mother. I have left out Great-Aunt Mag and Auntie Nellie, because I never felt that their admiration for me was quite as unstinting as the others.

What a life for a little chap - more comics, magazines and books than even Mr Voracious could read. And the pictures, at least once a week. Afterwards it was Cafollas Café for a Knickerbocker Glory, a huge ice-cream soda with every known variety of tinned fruit and syrup, topped with cream, and eaten with a long spoon. Oh, and it had jelly in it, as well.

And the Granny, dear old Muds, was a good cook. For some reason – and, of course, you could never tell from looking at me – food has always been important to me. ‘A racing snake’ is the most frequent comparison made by the thinking listener. I am quick to demur. I will point to a millimetre of superfluous subcutaneous at belt level, a suggestion of slack around the pecs, the six-pack stomach a mite less than perfect, but they won’t have it. ‘How do you stay so trim?’ they query, enviously. I have no answer. It’s a gift!

I love my food, the savour, the flavour. I don’t know why – Rosie Wogan (Byrne that was) was Ireland’s worst cook. And that’s saying something, in a nation that traditionally burnt the finest of meat to a frazzle, and reduced its vegetables to mush. Auntie May always maintained that when she got married, her sister Rose ‘couldn’t boil water’. I believed her because my mother never improved. She never learned a *thing* at Muds’s knee: she never knew that you put butter in mashed potatoes; I never saw a mushroom until I was seventeen; all meat was cooked to the consistency of an old boot, and the only egg she ever really mastered was a fried one.

Strangely enough, she *could* do tripe and onions. Luckily, we only got that when Uncle Charlie Foster (no relation, just a commercial traveller befriended by my father) arrived for tea. And it *was* tea – *tea* with tea, and bread and butter. The other meals were breakfast and lunch. Even for the middle classes, ‘dinner’, not to mind ‘supper’, didn’t catch on in Ireland until the 1960s.

Uncle Charlie was from Dublin; tall, florid, handsome, ebullient and full of charm. My mother said he looked like Preston Foster, a Hollywood star of the 1930s. She must have liked him a lot because not many got past our front door in Limerick ... She would dole out the tripe and onions, and Uncle Charlie Foster would exclaim, ‘Lovely

grub!' It's only now that I wonder what sort of a cook *his* wife was.

Rose was not bad on the old pastry; her steak-and-kidney pie was okay, but, once she got hold of an idea, it was very hard to shake her off. For years, every Sunday, we had round steak (topside, to you), cooked in silver paper. I don't know who passed on this culinary gem, but it was a good job they never came knocking on our front door on a Sunday.

Michael, the Da, never complained. Mind you, Rose could never do any wrong in his eyes, anyway. She was his life, his light, his lodestar. In any relationship, there is always a lover, and a loved. He was the lover. Tactile, sentimental, gentle, caring - and not a bad cook. I wish he had done more of this when I was a child.

Later in life, when my mother's arthritis became very bad, and her hands were more useless, the Da would do the cooking. But, no less than my mother, he was a man of fixed culinary ambitions. For tea, he liked toast, buttered, then topped with tomato and cheese. Watching him prepare this could not have been much dissimilar to watching Escoffier do his stuff.

The bread carefully buttered, tomatoes peeled, then sliced, cheese thinly pared - the whole was then slipped under a pre-heated grill. 'The loveliest meal you ever ate,' was how Michael described it. 'What about tea?' he would say, around about six o'clock every evening. 'What do you fancy, Rose? What about the old reliable?' - meaning the cheese and tomatoes on toast. My mother would look at me and cast her eyes to heaven. She always fancied a rasher and egg.

The Granny could cook a bit: I mind well the wondrously succulent fresh mackerel, caught that very day off Howth pier by the Da, when he would join us in Dublin for his two-week summer holiday. He loved fishing. It was his only release from the hard grind of grocering. He liked to watch

Limerick Football Club as well, and go to the dogs on a Wednesday night, but fishing was his passion.

In Limerick he would fly-fish for trout on the Maigue River, a tributary of the Shannon. Occasionally, if he got a lift from a friendly fisherman, he would hurl a line into the surf at Quilty, Co. Clare, in search of sea-bass. 'The chicken of the sea,' he called it. The French call it 'loup' - the wolf - but what do they know?

We didn't have a car in Limerick - just the Da's bike. And up on the cross-bar would pop little Michael Terence on a Sunday after Mass, and off we would go a-fishing, just the Da and I, with a flask and some Limerick ham sandwiches. There was not much Rose could do to these, although they *could* have done with a little more mustard.

Out past the docks we would go, past the flour mills, the steel works, the cement factory, and then the muddy banks of the Maigue. We didn't fish immediately. We hardly fished at all. For my father the getting ready was all, just as it was with the cheese and tomato on toast. Meticulous preparation: rod, line, flies tied and carefully affixed, then, as the sun was going down behind the cement factory, the first cast of the day.

I do not, unsurprisingly, remember any great creels of fish being landed: just the rare trout and the odd flounder, and plenty of eels, which we threw back. I know, *I know*, but it was just as well. What my mother could have made out of cooking an eel does not bear thinking about. Those days by the riverbank are misty memories now, but I saw the curlew and heard the corncrake, something my children never have ...

I never took to fishing, myself. A boy rebelling against his father? Not me. I never rebelled against anything in my life. Conventional, bourgeois, middle-class, that's me. Do what you are told; follow orders; listen to your betters; don't show off; who do you think you are?; do your homework; go to bed; get a job. That's me ... How I ever stumbled into the

racy world of radio, television and showbiz is a mystery, not least to myself. Later on in this mighty tome, we will delve deeper, if you haven't lost interest by then.

I think it was Howth put me off the fishing. Howth Harbour was where my father, Uncle Charlie Foster and me would go to hurl a line off the pier into the Irish Sea, in the usually forlorn hope of chancing upon a mackerel, a pollock or e'en a pinkeen with suicidal tendencies.

Uncle Charlie and the Da would swing their lines, hooked and weighted with lead, and let fly into what a fellow Dublin schoolboy, James Joyce, referred to lovingly, as the 'snotgreen sea'. Not little Terence - that was too easy. I watched other fishermen just pick up the lead weight, and hurl that into the sea. Seemed a lot more straightforward to me. But that is the way I have been all my life: the line of least resistance: the easy way out. I can't be bothered ...

I got my just deserts that day: as the lead weight flew out of my hand, the fish-hook flew into a finger, caught and buried itself. Although I have always fancied my philosophy to be Corinthian, with Stoical tendencies, there was little of the latter about me that day. Marcus Aurelius would have turned his nose up at my yelling and screaming, particularly when they took me, in Uncle Charlie's car, to the emergency ward of a Dublin hospital. There, an apprentice butcher removed the hook, without local anaesthetic, as if he had spent his formative years at Torquemada's knee. I have never picked up a line with a hook at the end of it since.

A PROPER JOB?

If you have come this far, it will not have escaped your notice that I am not a great man for detail. As is the fashion nowadays, I blame my father. It is the new philosophy: nobody is responsible for their mistakes, their flaws, their failings. It is all the fault of the genes, the peer group, the

teacher or the parent. So, it is the Da's fault. He was so hard-working, diligent and meticulous, that his elder son's subconscious must have taken flight: I could never work as hard as that! I haven't a painstaking bone in my body. Anything that doesn't come freely and easily to me is something from which I will stride away, with a spring in my step and a light laugh.

When I tell people I have never done a hard day's work in my life, they assume that I am joking. 'What about getting up at all hours of the morning to do your radio show?' they petulantly query. 'What about all those years of live television on *Wogan*?' 'What about *Children in Need*?' Pshaw! And when I say that, I mean it, whatever it means

...

What I have done for nearly forty years has not been 'work'. It is not a proper 'job'. Even my four years spent in the employ of the Royal Bank of Ireland didn't seem like work. It was a piece of cake. Work? Toiling down a mine, that's work. Digging up a road, that's work. Snagging turnips and footing turf, that's what I call work ...

Maybe it is the Jesuit training, but I have always felt the shadow of guilt about how easily things have come to me; I played games without too much effort, and even less training. Apart from maths, schoolwork came easily. A pretty undistinguished scholar, unless driven to it, I only excelled at Latin because the teacher frightened me to death. I seem to have floated on the sea of life, eschewing effort, avoiding conflict. An optimist - you know, someone who does not realize the seriousness of the situation.

GROWING UP IN LIMERICK

So, without knowing too much of the details, Michael Terence Wogan was born to Rose and Michael Wogan, in Mother Cleary's Nursing Home, Elm Park, Limerick, on the

3 August 1938. It was a dark and stormy night. Or maybe it was the morning? Or the middle of the day? I never asked.

My mother used to make great play of the thunder and lightning that lit up Limerick upon my birth, but if Apollo was trying to tell me something, it has never been made clear. Rose used to claim that on the first day she took her beloved first-born out in his pram, a great gust of wind tried to pull it from her grasp. Perhaps I should have been a weather forecaster. I wonder if the same thing happened to Michael Fish? He missed a Great Wind, too, remember?

Born in the town of Limerick, then, Ireland's third biggest town. Not a city. No cathedral, you see. But more churches than Nashville, Tennessee. But, unlike Nashville, Tennessee, all of the same denomination: Roman Catholic.

Limerick was more Roman Catholic than the Vatican. Not a lot of Christianity, if by that you mean love and tolerance of your fellow man, but *plenty* of religion. They had something called the 'Arch-Confraternity', a sort of Catholic Freemasonry, except that there was no secrecy. 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, paid your fare on the bus. 'Ah, don't stir, Seán. I have it here.'

The Da never joined. Maybe he was never asked, but he wasn't exactly big on religion. Neither was my mother. I think she had too much of a sense of humour for it. Oh, they went to Mass, ate fish on Fridays, kept the Lenten Regulations, and made sure their two sons had a good Catholic education and kept the Faith, but I never felt, at least in retrospect, that their hearts and souls were entirely in it. Maybe I am trying to make my own agnosticism easier to understand.

In his great Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Frank McCourt makes Limerick childhood seem like growing up in the Black Hole of Calcutta, and in the poverty-stricken slums behind St John's Castle, with a ne'er-do-well for a father, it

surely was. In the lower-middle-class environs of Elm Park, Ennis Road, it was okay. It was not the lap of luxury - we didn't have a car or a telephone. We *did* have a radio, though. Along with the books, it saved my life. No, it *made* my life.

There, in that provincial Irish town on the banks of the Shannon, many miles from London, and light years away from its culture and sophistication, I grew up in the BBC, with the Light Programme. It became my window on the world, my magic carpet to another place. It influenced my thoughts, my speech, my attitudes, my sense of humour. Everyone else of my contemporaries seemed to be listening to Irish Radio, but I struggled towards puberty with the help of *Workers' Playtime*, *Mrs Dale's Diary*, *Dick Barton: Special Agent*, *Much Binding in the Marsh* and then, *Take it from Here*, *Educating Archie*, *The Goons* and *Hancock's Half Hour*. I was a right little West Brit ...

As a young, and for six glorious years, *only* son and heir, I must have had a high old time of it, hopping between Limerick and Dublin, and enjoying the undivided attention, not to say devotion, of Michael, Rose, all those aunties and a granny. Youth is wasted on the young, as some other Irish seer once mumbled through his beard, and I don't remember a thing.

There are pictures extant of our boy as a babe, and of a manly little chap in a bathing suit. The latter would have been snapped on Sandymount Strand, a huge expanse of beach on Dublin Bay, about ten minutes by bus from the city centre, or Nelson's Pillar, as we used to call it. That was because, in the centre of O'Connell Street, Dublin, directly opposite the General Post Office, scene of the momentous and historic Rising of 1916, stood this memorial to one of *Britain's* greatest heroes, Horatio Nelson. You could climb up several hundred steps, and get a view over Dublin's Fair City from Nelson's balcony. No more: some eejit struck a proud blow for Irish

independence by dynamiting poor old Nelson, mighty pedestal and all, in the mid-1960s. There has been a gap there ever since.

Of late, plans are afoot to fill that gap with some class of plinth or suitable sculpture. Modern, of course, this *is* the capital city of the Tiger Economy of Europe! They have even asked the citizenry what they should call it. They will never learn. There is a picturesque, statuesque fountain in O'Connell Street of a reclining woman, a representation of the River Liffey - 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' is how the City Fathers would have it. To the great unwashed of Dublin, it is 'The Floozy in the Jacuzzi'. Every statue in O'Connell Street has a nickname; that is about the only one suitable for your delicate ears. I have no high hopes for poor old Nelson's replacement.

Sandymount Strand, where you see yours truly so winsomely pictured, does have a couple of memories for me: I will never forget the panic of being lost there. I wandered into the sea, dug about a bit with my little spade, and when I turned around, everyone had gone. The beach was heaving with half the population of Dublin, but there was nobody I recognized. It was probably only about ten minutes before I was found, but the screaming fear of being lost, abandoned, seemed to me to last for hours. It must have been traumatic - it is one of very few memories of pre-school years that remain.

One other thing about Sandymount Strand, although this may well have struck me forcibly a little later: you could walk for miles out into the Irish Sea, without the water ever getting above your ankles. Some people claimed that they had strolled over to the Isle of Man and back, without ever getting their togs wet ... Perhaps it was just as well that we never got immersed; one of the features of the Sandymount seashore was Dublin's raw sewage floating idly by.

According to my mother, I was a strange child. I would go out to play with the other toddlers of Elm Park, Limerick,

but for no great length of time. Back I would come, shutting the gate firmly behind me, and into my own little world. It was ever thus. I love my wife and family, I have good and loyal friends, but I never tire of my own company. I need a little time to myself, every day. I have no difficulty meeting and socializing, but I like my own space. And I like things to finish when I am ready - back into my own cocoon, shutting the gate firmly behind me.

People often ask me whether in my declining years, I would go back to live in Ireland. Much as I love the Irish, their wit and warmth, I don't think so. You see, the Irish just won't go home. They arrive late and leave even later. I don't think I could bear it. I love long, lazy lunches, particularly French ones, but dinner party guests should remember they have homes to go to. Irish people do not. They will rise from the table at about one in the morning, pause for another hour at the dining room door, linger in the hall and exit through the front door a couple of hours later, still talking ...

I admit it, I have become Anglicized. Years ago, when the present Mrs Wogan and I first graced Blighty's shore, for our first dinner party at home, we invited people for eight o'clock. I was just getting out of the bath, when the guests arrived, right on time. I couldn't believe it. *Nobody* in Ireland arrives for a dinner party on time. Half an hour late is considered gauche. Those who *really* know the score, turn up an hour and a half late. You don't want to be standing around drinking for hours, do you?

OFF TO SCHOOL

They piled me off to school at five, about a mile down the Ennis Road, to Ferrybank, a preparatory school run by the Salesian nuns. It was just up the road from Barrington's Pier, where the sallies grew, and Cleeve's Toffee Factory, which filled the air with the very scent of heaven.

Mother took me there with my little schoolbag, and left me in the care of the kindly nuns. She had barely returned home, before there was a knock on the front door. There I was again. Fresh-faced and fine-featured, I declared myself home, and enquired civilly on the prospects of lunch. That'll be enough of school, I had felt, after about ten minutes, and had walked out of the front gates and home ...

I still like home best. Throughout the eight-year run of my thrice-weekly talk-show, *Wogan*, the high spot of the evening was dinner at home with my wife. I am sure that people imagined it to be an endless round of showbiz partying, and clubbing 'til the dawn, but after the show was over, at about 7.40 p.m., I would share a glass of the BBC's finest vintage, in what became known as 'Hostility', with my guests and the production team, and then I was outta there, heading for the comforts of home.

Mind you, when you love food as much as I do, and you are married to someone who cooks as well as my wife, then there is really no contest between the bright lights and home.

TWO

OCCASIONS OF SIN

AFTER FOUR GENTLE dream-like years at preparatory school, the Salesian nuns showed me the door and the night-mare began. They sent me off to the big boys' school, Crescent College, Limerick. It was not really nightmarish, but the end of innocence. It could have been worse, much worse. It could have been boarding school. It could have been the Christian Brothers, men whose legendary cruelty and brutality could only be compared to a particularly bad-tempered Mongol horde.

The Jesuit fathers who took charge of me were no Mary Poppinses, but glimmerings of humanity occasionally broke through their ascetic severity. The Jesuits dressed in black and had wings - panels to their black coats, that flew back as they walked. Black angels. Frightening - at least for a nine-year-old.

Over the years of growing up, fear was replaced by a certain amount of respect, and even a grudging affection - not for those who doled out the corporal punishment, though. You got beaten for everything: bad homework, wrong homework, inattention, misbehaviour - anything. Not that you got punished on the spot. No, they wanted you to think about it, before you got the works.

Corporal punishment was the way forward in education in those days, even for the highly educated and civilized Jesuits. And they had a most peculiarly sadistic way of dealing it out. 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. Depending on the seriousness of the error or transgression, that chit would be good for three or six heavy welts across the hands with a reinforced leather strap, administered by a cheery, burly priest named Father Bates.

Here was a man who took real pleasure in his work, obviously deriving considerable spiritual benefit from offering your suffering up to God. The sadistic bit was that this was no instant, spur-of-the-moment leathering. No, you had to wait until lunchtime, to join a queue of other unfortunates, and watch them get their hands knocked off, until it came to your turn.

With no feeling in my swollen hands, I would cycle off home for lunch, then back an hour later, into class again, and a couple of hours after that, find myself queuing up *again* for more gratuitous violence, before the kindly Jesuits let me out for the day.

And in case you think you are dealing with a junior combination of Jack the Ripper and Joey the Eejit here, let me tell you that this ongoing torture was the lot of all but the brightest and most dutiful ... Extraordinary to think that men as sophisticated and supposedly intelligent as the Jesuits could use terror as their main tool in the education of young minds, even allowing for the fact that it was the norm in those days.

SPORTING LIFE

At Crescent, I played rugby from the time I was about ten, and tennis. Strangely enough, it was when playing tennis rather than rugby that I received my most serious injury: missing a forehand, I knocked my own front tooth out. No great loss, although a more accurate shot would have knocked both of them out. Early pictures show a pair of front teeth more suited to a rabbit. These, combined with a

pair of ears that would have given Mr Spock a run for his money, were the subject of many a cruel jibe from my peers, none of whom, incidentally, were oil paintings themselves.

The removal of one tooth pushed back the other one a bit, deflecting the slurs, and acting as a frightener for opposing prop-forwards, when I took the false tooth out for rugby.

We didn't play football, a game for hooligans and the lower orders; and cricket and hockey were regarded as Protestant activities. The Irish national games, Gaelic football and hurling, were for 'National' and Christian Brothers schools, that is non-fee-paying ones. Middle-class Irish schoolboys played middle-class British games. (There was no 'upper' class. If you were that high up the totem pole you went to a Catholic public school in England.) 'Garrison' games, they were called, by the true sons of the Gael: games played by the former army of occupation, the British soldiery.

Now that I think of it, given my maternal grandfather, I was entitled ... Golf, another game introduced by the British, got in under the wire somewhere and avoided stigma - perhaps because it was played by officers, and the Irish always had respect for anyone on a horse.

CATHOLICS AND PRODS

The prejudices and hatreds generated by religion in Ireland are well documented over hundreds of years, and all too familiar over the last three decades, but, in my formative years, and well into the 1960s, there was a fair amount of fear and loathing attached not just to where you prayed, but what you played. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) bestrode the island like a colossus, forming the third point of the triumvirate that ruled: Church, State and GAA.

Restrain the urge to laugh - it was not funny. Well, it was not meant to be. The GAA rule was simple: play rugby or