

The Cows of Carlow

A Conversation With My Grandad

On entering his office, Grandad reaches to the top shelf to fetch his box of *Memorabilia*, his personal collection of relics and photographs that provide for him a timeless portal to years gone by. He hands me his Grandfather's pocket watch (which he had written of in his story *My Grandfather's Pocket Watch*), the cold metal of its dented case sitting snug in my palm. Grandad encourages me to wind it up, as he had done before. My 21st century hands, accustomed to the convenience of the automated digital time of my iPhone lock-screen, don't feel worthy of the venerable device.

Embarrassingly, I'm not sure whether to turn the stem winder clockwise or anticlockwise, so I try both. Much to my delight, the dormant timepiece's second hand comes to life, and the steady *ticks* of its mechanical heartbeat start to measure the passage of time once more. Grandad recalls how his grandfather proudly donned this portable timepiece during a rather unusual period for Irish timekeeping.



My Great-Great-Grandfather's Pocket Watch. Over time, it has lost one of its hands and its glass face

The Statutes (Definition of Time) Act 1880 established Dublin Mean Time (DMT) as Ireland's national standard time. Prior to 1880, each town operated on local mean solar time, with noon occurring when the sun reached its highest point in the sky at a given location, such that the time that people observed reflected the local environment rather than a distinct standard. DMT was based on the local mean time recorded at Dunsink Observatory, just northwest of Dublin city. Dunsink's location being a little over 6° west of Royal Observatory Greenwich meant that DMT was 25 minutes and 21 seconds behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), the official time in Great Britain. Over the thirty-six year lifespan of Ireland's unique time zone, this distinction came to be seen as an administrative inconvenience in an increasingly interconnected world. This was particularly evident in Ireland's transport and communication systems. Mailboats from Holyhead in Wales used arrive at Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) harbour to be met by the Dublin and

Kingstown Railway line, which Grandad recalls extending right out onto the pier to collect passengers and parcels headed for Dublin. The accuracy and coordination required for such meticulous operations encouraged the



introduction of the Time (Ireland) Act 1916. But Irish nationalists interpreted it differently. To them, abandoning DMT and synchronising Irish and British time zones symbolised a loss of Irish identity, which was especially important at such a pivotal time in Ireland's push for independence. So while GMT was observed by the banks and post offices, it was rejected by much of the Irish population, who tenaciously stuck with Dublin Mean Time, or, as some locals liked to call it, *Old God's Time*.

From 1865 until 1916, the famous Time Ball on top of the Ballast Office (then headquarters of Dublin Port) at Aston Quay dropped every day at 1pm to allow navigators on ships in the Liffey to calibrate their chronometers. The dropping of the Time Ball started to follow GMT around 1914, a couple of years prior to the official switch, but locals knew that the descent of this giant bronze ball down its mast indicated a local time of 12:35pm, as deliberated by Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Bloomsday*. Meanwhile in Tullow, my great-great-grandfather's hometown in Co. Carlow, there was no such sophisticated



Westmoreland Street in the early 1900s. The Time Ball is visible in the left background

community timepiece. And so possession of a personal timepiece conferred considerable social status. One could estimate the approximate time based on when the church bells last chimed, or even the apparent position of the sun in the sky. But only the gentleman with a silver chain peeking out from his waistcoat might know the *right time*. For most people, however, daily tasks could be scheduled around more general periods like morning and evening, and the precision of minutes and seconds hadn't yet become central to the

daily routines of Irish lives. I remind Grandad of his witty narrative about how the Carlow farmers would claim that their cows didn't know anything about GMT, but followed a time determined by the sun. As Grandad says, perhaps it was the cows who knew the *right time*.

I place the tireless old pocket watch on Grandad's desk, alongside my iPhone and Grandad's laptop. I wonder what my great-great-grandfather would think of the modern timepieces of his descendants and how they compare to his own. Would he marvel at the efficiency and accessibility of the smartphone and the precision of the atomic clock to which it is synced? In humanity's pursuit of the *right time*, our modern technologies have achieved a level of accuracy far beyond what can be perceived in everyday life. To tell the time, we no longer need to approach strangers on the street or seek out the local timepiece, nor must we take part in the daily ritual of winding up our watches to ensure their reliability. We have traded the social and tangible aspects of timekeeping for precision and convenience. As we continue to venture deeper into our modern obsession with precise timekeeping, it is worth considering how our relationship with time has been transformed by this obsession. On my



Minot's Tower, St. Patrick's Cathedral

morning commute to college (as a medical student currently on clinical placement in the Coombe Hospital), I cycle past St. Patrick's Cathedral, home to Dublin's oldest public clock, which dates back to 1560. I often steal a glance over my left shoulder at the old clock atop the cathedral's impressive tower, knowing that the closer its minute hand is to pointing straight upwards to the *XII* numeral, the faster I should pedal in order to get to the Coombe on time. Inevitably, I am always rushing – my parents say that I have *no concept of time*. But concept of time has changed, and I can't help but envy the students of years gone by, for whom a matter of seconds and minutes probably carried far less weight. I somehow also envy those old cows of Carlow, who, despite the temporal frenzy around them, always seemed to know what time it *really* was.

References

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