

Then There Was Light

Stories Powered By The
Rural Electrification
Scheme In Ireland



PJ Cunningham — EDITORS — Dr Joe Kearney

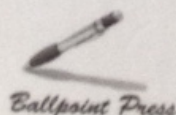


'Then There Was Light' is a collection of stories set against a backdrop of the Rural Electrification Scheme's roll-out across the country 70 years ago.

The stories, from eye-witnesses, ESB employees and the general public offer a rare glimpse into the Ireland of that time. They also outline the challenges faced in implementing arguably the greatest social revolution ever experienced in the country.



The accounts capture the tension that arose between old Ireland and the making of the new. Some people embraced the scheme enthusiastically while others declared that electrification could "blow up everyone in their own beds."



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Rural Electrification
Scheme In Ireland

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Ballpoint Press

*This book is dedicated to all those who had
a role in the electrification of Rural Ireland*

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Foreword

IT has been widely acknowledged that the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) was at the heart of arguably the greatest single change in Irish life brought about in the middle of the last century by "The Rural Electrification Scheme".

Seventy years later in 2016, it is indeed fitting that the stories surrounding that national roll-out should be recorded for posterity.

When we set about gathering some of those memories from former ESB workers in that scheme and people who witnessed the historic development along the highways and byways, little did we think there would be such a massive response from the general public as well.

While there was a lot of commonality in the accounts of gangs and poles arriving and later for the switching-on ceremonies, many amazing stories were sent to us, which are now being preserved for posterity in this collection.

We would like to record our appreciation to those who wrote their stories or were interviewed for this collection on the Rural Electrification Scheme.

Part of the tradition of Ireland has been our ability to comment on what's happening around us in song and verse. Accordingly, we have also included a section reflecting this heritage.

The hope is that the book in its entirety will provide a valuable snapshot of how the people of that time responded as the first tentative steps on the road to modern Ireland were taken.

PJ Cunningham — EDITORS — *Dr Joe Kearney*

Acknowledgements

WE would firstly like to record our sincere thanks to all the people who got in touch with the ESB and ourselves to make this publication possible.

Hundreds of people had either stories to tell or information to pass on which allowed us to produce both this book and an accompanying radio documentary.

We also are thankful that many of the vignettes from the time, while not suitable for this publication, are now also recorded, collated and safely preserved in the extensive ESB Archives for future generations of researchers, historians and sociologists.

Within the ESB this project was greeted with a warmth and enthusiasm that made this project a labour of love for the co-editors.

We are particularly indebted for the guidance and support of ESB Archives staff – Brendan Delany, Brian McMahon, Deirdre McParland and Kirsten Mulrennan.

This team plays a critical role in safeguarding the history and heritage of ESB and they do so with huge professionalism and passion. The archive was a very rich and invaluable source for our research where we also sourced virtually all of the photos that tell their own stories as part of this anthology.

We would like to record our gratitude to Bernadine Maloney, Corporate Communications and Public Affairs Manager, ESB and the company's Senior Press Officer, Paul Hand for the continuous enthusiasm they showed for this project from the outset.

Our thanks also to ESB CEO, Pat O'Doherty, for setting the scene for this book by writing the introduction.

Lastly, to our own families for the support they gave us while we were absent on this *Then There Was Light* mission that took up so much of 2016 – the 70th anniversary of the ESB's Rural Electrification Scheme.

EDITORS

Introduction

THE rural electrification scheme was one of the most important social and economic developments of 20th century Ireland. It transformed a very tough way of life that had existed for generations and sowed the seeds for Ireland's future growth and prosperity.

To understand its origins, it is necessary to go back to the Shannon Scheme which had been completed almost three decades earlier. Thomas McLaughlin, a young engineer who had worked with Siemens in Germany together with the senior executives of that company, convinced the new Irish Free State Government to invest one fifth of its annual revenue in a scheme to harness the flow of the Shannon to supply electricity to the nation.

McLaughlin passionately believed that electricity held the key to our economic development and recognised its potential to transform Ireland. At the time, the country was recovering from the aftermath of civil war and the First World War and life was difficult and uncertain. The Government shared McLaughlin's vision, realising that the completion of a major infrastructure project would be a potent symbol of political independence and economic sovereignty.

From the outset, McLaughlin was clear in his intent that Ireland's rural communities should enjoy the comforts that villagers in other lands took for granted, commenting later: "My country of which I was so intensely proud must not lag behind other lands... Electricity, the great key uplift of the country, must be provided on a national scale, cheap and abundant".

In developing the Shannon Scheme, the Government had accepted the premise that unified control of the production and distribution of electricity was necessary to achieve the rapid development Ireland needed. ESB was created in 1927 with full responsibility for the generation, transmission, distribution and marketing of electricity, thus becoming not only the first semi-state body in Ireland but also

the first fully national electricity service in the world. Thomas McLaughlin was appointed as the first managing director.

Over the next two decades, ESB brought electricity to every major town and village in Ireland, taking over responsibility from local authorities and buying out private electricity suppliers. However although prices fell, electricity remained expensive and 400,000 homes remained without electricity.

In the 1930s, the Government's focus on economic development through self-sufficiency led to the creation of new semi-state bodies, including Bord na Móna, CIÉ and Irish Sugar. Within ESB, there was a steadfast belief that the development of a rural electricity network could further support this movement and would help to drive the country forward.

Thanks to the leadership and pioneering spirit of people like Thomas McLaughlin, William Roe and Paddy (PJ) Dowling in ESB, and the foresight of the political establishment at the time, the scheme was given the go ahead and work on the first phase began in 1946.

This was an enormous achievement. Cost was a major factor and, like today's deliberations around rural broadband which has the potential to be equally transformative, the Government had to be convinced that this was the right way to allocate scarce resources in the face of other political pressures.

The Rural Electrification Scheme was executed with what can only be described as patriotic zeal. William Roe who was in charge of the project and his deputy PJ Dowling were not only highly educated and experienced, but also hugely committed to Ireland's future. For many of the young workers involved, their own rural backgrounds and the opportunity to work on something truly innovative fuelled their passion to get the job done and the can-do attitude that came to characterise the scheme.

When I joined ESB in 1981, the sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps of the 'rural' group was still evident. They epitomised the close-knit teamwork that comes from years of helping each other out on the highways and byways of the country and left a lasting legacy for the company.

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Thomas

We talk a lot today of stakeholder management and community engagement, but the people working on rural electrification truly set the standard for ESB that continues today. They recognised that success depended on the goodwill of farmers and landowners, and the willingness of communities to support us. They had the might of statute behind them, but they looked on that statutory strength as a place of last resort. Their default was to get out, talk and get agreement on what needed to be done. The more connected to the community they were, the better.

They could see the effects that electrification would have on country life, particularly for farming communities, and sold the concept as if they were looking back on the experience. They recognised the influencers within homes and communities and co-opted community groups like the ICA, Macra na Feirme, Muintir na Tíre and of course the local parish priests as advocates. Rural Ireland was still very conservative and resistant to anything too modern, but if the church was in favour, it was generally deemed acceptable!

Women also played a key role in marketing the Scheme, recognising the potential to enhance their own lives. By all accounts, farmers were slow to see beyond the cost until they were asked by young ladies at dances whether they had "got the electricity in?".

It was the ESB rural engineers, the demonstrators and the workers who were the front line in an incredible marketing and sales team. They learned very quickly how to open doors and farm gates even in the most difficult of circumstances. I am sure that the enthusiasm and sense of purpose that the team shared helped to drive its success and overcome the obstacles that they met along the way.

They left a lasting legacy to our organisation, to the rural communities in which they operated and to the development of Irish society. Being part of a large organisation didn't automatically entitle them to respect – they had to earn that respect.

And they did.

It is appropriate that, in celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Rural Electrification scheme, we gather the stories from both our own workers and those on the other side of the fence. This collection

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ensures many of the tales surrounding one of the most important and transformative projects in the history of the State are recorded for posterity. While the pages of this book may recall a very different time to modern Ireland, they also shine a light into the life of our forebears and we get a sense of the same pride, humour and belonging back then that is still intrinsic in Ireland's people.

Pat O'Doherty,
CEO, ESB



Energy for
generations

Sputniks And Brown Bread

Delo Collier

IT was a time when the world was concerned about Sputniks. Those early Russian space satellites were blamed for things that could not be easily explained – a long spell of bad weather, an alteration in the migratory pattern of birds or even the failure of a herring run in a Western fjord. There was a cold war threatened out there, somewhere beyond the horizon. People said prayers for the conversion of Russia, looked to the sky and frowned. Around this time of global concern I was travelling a rutted road in the West of Ireland.

On that day my worries were not related to Kremlin matters, or to the goings-on in Washington, but to the tyres on my car. I had just changed a punctured wheel outside Clifden in Connemara and knew that I had no time to arrange a repair to the damaged tyre. I had an appointment to keep and my heart was anxious, as a recently appointed ESB Demonstrator, that standards would be upheld.

My job was to smooth the transition from solid fuel ranges, cookers and cumbersome domestic arrangements to the new, easy, clean, efficient and labour saving equipment supplied by the Electricity Supply Board. My territory included Connemara, an area of wild beauty but of unforgiving potholes and vicious ruts.

A condition of my appointment was that I should provide my own transport. In reality I neither had a car nor could I drive. My father, himself an ESB employee, took the matter in hand. Without undue fuss he taught me the rudiments of driving and accompanied me when I bought my first car. I was a proud but somewhat nervous first-time motorist on the morning when we collected the car. "Pull in here," he

said to me when we came to a wide roadside margin. "I'm off for about half an hour and I want to see one of those wheels changed by the time I get back."

I flustered and protested but he would have none of it. I watched his back as he strolled off down the road and disappeared around a bend. What could I do but take the manual from the glove box?

By the time he returned from his constitutional, I was smeared with oily grease and my knees were bruised from balancing on loose roadside gravel, but the job was done. He tested the wheel nuts, nodded approval and explained that I would be driving the roads of Connemara and would have to change a wheel unassisted. His lesson was well placed. During my time as Demonstrator I replaced so many punctured wheels I could perform the task in my sleep.

On the day I want to tell you about, I was about to be tested to the limits of my calling. I had two calls to make; one concerned a wayward Sputnik, the other concerned brown bread! To add to my worry, I had a punctured wheel sliding about in the boot and I was late for the first appointment. Recalling father's words about changing a puncture while driving in remote places I decided to try to persuade the local garage attendant in Clifden to fix the puncture while I had lunch.

As well as cookers, fridges, washing machines, kettles and irons, the ESB also sold spin dryers. There was a steady demand for clothes dryers in the West of Ireland where sleeveen, unexpected rain could dampen the spirits of any housewife. The vista of rain-sodden sheets forlornly draped along the length of a sagging clothesline and no prospect of a let-up, was enough to drive many to the sherry bottle.

For housewives, the prospect of a spin dryer in the kitchen provided a magical solution to the problem. But there was a snag. The machines that were sold worked well enough. They dried clothes, but the action of high revving dryers on clothes, largely made from natural fibres, could be a little dramatic to say the least. At 3,000 revolutions per minute the spin dryers were inclined to take off and dance around the kitchen. It was a disconcerting sight in an era of new energy. Newspaper articles related stories of satellites in space. These reports were often accompanied by images of revolving

contraptions spinning they might be called Sputniks? It seemed

I set off, an hour for late arrival with ditches of foxglove to avoid stray Cobumping along a line. Nothing for it but glad of the advice the car! Now quiet of the farmhouse when I knocked at appeared. "I turn you to see it leaping the antics of an ant to get it to stop da only way to get it that eventually."

She insisted v watched the machine it had gone through the machine was We found a new between a dress forcefully declining again. This time seemed much ha put a few concrete might spoil the l

When I drove individually in pairs but my day was to sort out.

My next call England to work

contraptions spinning in orbit around the earth. No one was sure how they might be controlled, so why not call those errant spin dryers Sputniks? It seemed appropriate.

I set off, an hour late, for my appointment hoping that my excuse for late arrival would be believed. I steered my little car between ditches of foxglove and fuchsia, careful to ease it over potholes and to avoid stray Connemara blackface sheep, until I noticed the car bumping along a little too much! Yes! You guessed it! Another flat tyre. Nothing for it but to get on with the job of changing the wheel and be glad of the advice given on that day on the roadside when we bought the car! Now quite late for the appointment I pulled up in the yard of the farmhouse near Claddaduff. I could hear the dryer spinning when I knocked at the door. It was a while until the woman of the house appeared. "I turned it on expecting you earlier, Miss Collier. I wanted you to see it leppin' around the floor for yourself. D'you know its like the antics of an auld bachelor farmer at the afters of a wedding. I want to get it to stop dancin' around the kitchen but can't. Sometimes the only way to get it to behave is to sit on it but sure you'd get tired doing that eventually."

She insisted we drink tea and she boiled an egg to go with it as we watched the machine go through the last phases of its dance. When it had gone through its final cycle, I discovered that the floor beneath the machine was uneven and contributing to the erratic behaviour. We found a new location in the kitchen where we could hem it between a dresser and a sideboard. We drank more tea and I forcefully declined another boiled egg while we tested the drier again. This time the performance was greatly improved and the lady seemed much happier with the results. "Himself kept threatening to put a few concrete blocks on it to keep it steady, but I thought that might spoil the look of the place. I'm glad it never came to that."

When I drove out of the yard I had a half-dozen eggs, wrapped individually in pages of the 'Connacht Tribune', to keep me company, but my day was not over yet. There was the matter of brown bread to sort out.

My next call was a half-hour's drive away. A son had emigrated to England to work there on the buildings. A year previously he returned

for a summer holiday and he bought his mother a new-fangled electric cooker. The cooker was delivered sometime after his departure back to England. From that time, it sat in the mother's kitchen covered with an oilcloth and was used as a temporary table. Now a year later he was returning once more on vacation and the cooker was still unused. "He always praises my brown bread. I bake for him every day he's home and give him half a dozen loaves to take back with him to the digs. What in God's name will I do if that electric yoke won't bake brown bread?"

As I said, this was a life or death call. Brown bread was the litmus test of a good cook. Many families were reared on the stuff. Now I had to prove to a sceptic that the finished product from an electric oven could match the tried and tested offering from her solid-fuel range. She offered me a cup of tea before I settled into the challenge. She watched me like a hawk as I prepared and mixed and placed the bread into the oven. While we waited for the results she put a boiled egg and a couple slices of her bread before me. I tucked in with a forced enthusiasm. When the moment came to cut and butter my offering, I held my breath. Would this woman's son approve? Was it good enough to export in his suitcase to Kilburn or Cricklewood?

"God," she said, "you'd hardly know the difference."

As I eased myself back towards Galway, the sun was dropping into the Atlantic. I had the window open as I drove. There was turf smoke in the air, autumn was on way, you could smell it. I had a puncture to fix and six free-range eggs to give away.

There's only so many boiled eggs you can face in a lifetime.

Delo Collier, BA, started her career in hospitality management before joining the ESB as a district demonstrator in the Galway area. She managed the ESB Georgian House Museum at 29 Lr. Fitzwilliam and is a volunteer manager with Galway Civic Trust. Delo is also very active in community, archeological and heritage affairs.

Love Conquers All

Bridie O'Connor

HE was a plain lad – a big ‘Paddy’ of a fellow. As a young girl you wouldn’t give him a second glance, but he sort of grew on you. That was how I fell for Bill Jones in 1948. I was 19 and working in a grocery and bar in the centre of Mullingar.

This was the bright lights as far as I was concerned. Mullingar was Hollywood excitement compared to the small community town-land I was used to when I was a girl. I was in my element there.

Back then you knew most of the customers who shopped and drank in the establishment, so there was great curiosity regarding the new arrivals, the men putting in the light, the Rural Electrification gang. They’d leave in clothes to be collected for dry-cleaning, buy cigarettes or perhaps have a drink at weekends.

I first noticed Bill Jones the Saturday he came into the shop looking to buy cigarettes. I explained that cigarettes were rationed, as a result of the austerity following the war, and that locals were only allowed 5 per day. Bill explained that he was going to attend a football game in Dublin and pleaded with me to relent. I knew I shouldn’t, but he softened something inside me, and I sold him a couple of packets. He offered thanks and promised to bring me back a present from Dublin.

Bill was as good as his promise. When he next came into the shop to drop off laundry he brought me a box of chocolates and an invitation to accompany him to the cinema. I joked that this must be payback for the cigarettes but he insisted that I go, and I finally agreed. He was a tall rugged man and, looking back, you could never call him good-looking, but I saw something beyond that, something much deeper than skin.

Soon I realised that this was the beginning of a lovely romance. He was a perfect gentleman and treated me like a lady. I always felt

Then There Was Light

secure and safe in his company. Bill was over 6ft tall and I was a mere 5ft! He'd call me his 'little angel' or sometimes his 'little lady'. I felt so loved when he was with me.

Sometimes he'd call to the shop just so that he could walk me back to my lodgings in the evenings. It was simple, uncomplicated love.

But the Rural Electrification scheme by its very nature was a moveable one. The roll-out was happening across the countryside. Soon the local work was completed and the gang moved to the next location. We kept in touch and our romance flourished in spite of the obstacles thrown up by distance. Bill arranged taxis to meet me at Ballinasloe railway station so that I could get to my family home some weekends. He moved to work at Ballygar on the Roscommon border and I moved to Galway city to work. This made things easier for us. There was a bus service from Roscommon to Galway that went through Ballygar. Romance was finding ways to overcome obstacles. Amor Vincit Omnia, Love conquers all!

I opened a small shop of my own beside the sea. The future looked promising. Bill had even been to meet my parents a few times. We were going out together for about eighteen months.

But one day two girls came into the shop. They spoke to one another openly in my presence. They said they came from Ballygar and that there were some very nice ESB men working there on the Rural Electrification. One of them boasted about attending a football match with one of them that she fancied. She then said the name of this individual - Bill Jones!

I served the girls politely and pleasantly but it was hard to conceal my devastation. I immediately wrote to him. I challenged his fidelity and told him that I was breaking off our relationship. Bill Jones came to visit me in Galway on the first opportunity that he had. He pleaded with me to relent on my decision. He could not understand what the girls had meant and had not the slightest interest in any girl other than myself. But I held firm and finished our romance there and then. Bill continued to plead with me not to break-up with him, but I did and I now realise that that is one of the greatest regrets of my life.

I am 91 years old and know for certain that I loved Bill Jones and

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Almost
gets to read

Bridie O'Con
poet, who liv

Love Conquers All

should have believed and trusted him. I was told that he emigrated to America some time soon afterwards.

Rural Electrification may have brightened up the countryside but it left dark spots in two people's hearts that has never been lit.

Almost seventy years later, I hope somehow, somewhere Bill gets to read my memory.

Bridie O'Connor (nee Naughton) is a community volunteer, writer and poet, who lives in the village of Clonberne, Co. Galway.