



SAY CHEESE: The young have embraced the camera-phone with a vengeance, treating it like a toy

How far we have come from the sepia-tinted portraits of the past

Anita
ROBINSON

IN A casual conversation with a niece she mentions that her husband is compiling a family tree of our whole connection and would be grateful for any information about our forebears. Caught off-guard, I admit to being the custodian of the family archive – four generations of photographs that, by default, I unwittingly fell heir to when my parents died.

They occupy three drawers of a tallboy on the landing. I haven't looked at them for 30 years but Saturday finds me sitting on the floor with a magnifying glass amid a spreading sea of sepia-tinted and black and white images of people, many of whom died long before I was born, with neither a date nor a name between them by way of identification.

Who are these people? The clues are few. As 'the wee late one' I'm at a disadvantage. Those living within my own memory-span are easily identified. Here's my father in his dapper prime and chequered plus-fours in the 1930s; my mother, elegant at a wedding in the 1940s in a fox fur cape and a Mrs Miniver hat. And here's the one of my four elder siblings that mortified her. Taken when they lived in the country, they stand in a row like steps of stairs, the three boys muddy, tousled and sullen, one with no socks on, older sister



pristine and precise as a pin, as she remained all her life, smiling beside them. I got it enlarged and framed.

I squint through the magnifying glass at the faces of the anonymous. Friends? Or relations? A very present aid to identity is the family nose, triumphantly re-appearing in four generations – though those gifted with it (myself and Daughter Dear included) aren't that grateful.

Here's my Edwardian-corsetted paternal grandmother, possible originator of the nose and mistress of the village school, looking over her pince-nez with a particularly penetrating stare I have no difficulty emulating, though I take after the other side of the house. Here are my mother and her sisters in middle age. Put myself and a couple of cousins in the same place and pose and the likeness is uncanny though

We used to mock foreign tourists who saw the sights only through a lens. Now we're all at it, addicted to random snapping everything in sight

the features are diluted. A friend of mine once met a stranger at a conference. After some time conversing together, she told the stranger that her patterns of speech and body language reminded her very much of her friend Anita. "So they should," said my niece, (who had not inherited the family nose) "she's my auntie". It's all in the genes.

But back to the archive. One or two ancestors stand out. I have studio portraits of both on my hall wall – beautiful great-aunt Mary Frances, whose complexion was so perfect she was known as 'Peach'; great-aunt Sarah, who won the Irish Sweepstake, went to America and sent magical parcels full of exotic things – faceted glass jars of cinnamon hearts, a sticky-outty organdie dress for me and slip-on yellow leather shoes that I wept over when my feet outgrew them – and were probably the psychological root of my obsession with footwear bought for looks rather than comfort.

We used to mock foreign tourists who saw the sights only through a lens. Now we're all at it, addicted to random snapping everything in sight. The young have embraced the camera-phone with a vengeance. Even a four-year-old knows how to strike a pose – and nearly any female teen could give a masterclass in applying a cosmetically-sculpted, camera-ready face. I watched a girl in Venice, arm extended, features immobile, walk slowly through St Mark's square filming herself. The young treat the camera like a toy. How far we've come from 'watch the birdie', 'say cheese' or the glum reminder from the first communion photographer to his gap-toothed clientele, "smile with your mouth closed".

Why do people insist on sharing photographs on their mobile phone? The scrolling back and forth goes on for ever. "Gottit!" they say. "Lovely!" I say – but they make me look at 15 more.

WARNING: The moment I lay a finger on someone else's phone, it goes blank. Honestly.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 13 1920

Northern Officer Killed

A DESPERATE affray resulting in the deaths of two military officers and the wounding of a civilian occurred in Dublin in the early hours of yesterday morning. The tragic affair took place at the residence of Professor John Carolan at Upper Drumcondra Road where the military had gone to arrest two young men. One of the victims was Major G O S Smyth, DSO, MC, a brother of the late Commissioner Smyth who was shot dead in the County Club, Cork on July 17. The wounded civilian is Professor Carolan, a member of the staff of St Patrick's Training College, Drumcondra who was shot in the neck.

In an interview, Mrs Carolan described the terrible happenings as far as she knew them. About 1am a large force of military gained admittance to the house and demanded: 'We want Mulcahy [a reference to Richard Mulcahy, a Sinn Féin TD].' When Mrs Carolan replied that Mr Mulcahy did not reside there at present, they replied that they would search the house. Mrs Carolan was accompanying them upstairs when suddenly several shots rang out. (Born in 1890 and educated at Campbell College, Belfast, Major George Osbert Smyth had, like his murdered brother, a distinguished war record and had been transferred to Egypt by 1920. Gerald's assassination had greatly affected him, so much so that on learning that intelligence officers were being recruited in Egypt for service in Ireland, he volunteered. The so-called 'Cairo Gang's' mission to track down and assassinate Michael Collins and his notorious 'Squad'. Major Smyth was shot dead with a companion on a raid on a suspected 'safe house' where they exchanged shots with Dan Breen and Sean Treacy, leading IRA men. Smyth was buried beside his brother, Colonel Smyth, in Banbridge though there was no repeat of the sectarian violence which had followed Colonel Smyth's funeral in the town. Professor Carolan, who died later, was allegedly used as a human shield by the military.)

Kidnapped Schools Inspector 'Hostile to Gaelic'

WHILE Inspector Weatheruff, BL of the National Education Board was carrying out an inspection of the pupils in Magoney National School near Inniskeen, County Monaghan yesterday, armed but unmasked men entered the schoolroom and forcibly removed the inspector to an unknown destination.

The only motive locally assigned for the raid is the alleged hostility of Mr Weatheruff towards the teaching of the Irish language and history. The inspector was reportedly driven outside the borders of County Monaghan and ordered not to return.

Antrim Barracks Burned

LOUGHGUILE police barracks was burned to the ground on Monday night. It was fired some months ago and partially destroyed.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com