Looking Back on Beginnings

By Suzanne U. Clark

An American Childhood, by Annie Dillard
To School Through the Fields, by Alice Taylor

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One unexpected benefit of reading Alice Taylor's *To School Through the Fields* (St. Martin's) and Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood* (Harper & Row) is the treasure chest of one's own memories that is unlocked. Ninth Street North, Mrs. Murza, Gifford's Ice Cream Parlor, and Glen Carlyn Park reappear in vivid detail, and one relives cabbage smells and croquet with the delight of finding lost jewels. Of benefit also to the Christian looking for good contemporary literature is the basic decency, pleasure, and craftsmanship of both books, the first written by a best-selling author in her native Ireland; the second, by the winner of a Pulitzer Prize for an earlier work, *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.*

Taylor, who grew up in a family of seven children on a farm in southern Ireland, tells her story in simple but sensuous speech, leading *The Boston Herald* to praise the book as being “One of the most richly evocative and moving portraits of childhood [ever] written.” Taylor's story puts the reader at ease and while lacking the artistry of Dillard's more ambitious prose, her recollections unfold with an air of gentle humor and affection for the folks of the past. Her abiding affinity to “the very fields of home”, to the river Darigle, the eccentric Old Nell who “carried her false teeth around in her pocket”, and even the back-breaking work of the farm runs through the narrative like a sweet and constant music.

The book is organized into thirty-six short vignettes covering memorable personalities, family members, Catholic traditions, trips through the fields to a remote, unheated school (hence the title), favorite farm animals, and interesting descriptions of country life. These include the butchering and processing of hogs (“yalla bacon”), the ins and outs of milking cows (“singing time”) and making butter (“Long churning makes bad butter”), as well as the relentless demands of crop production, culminating in “one of the biggest events of the farming year”, the threshing. Taylor conveys the sense of drama attending her father's careful inspection of his labor's fruit:

> ...he scooped up the first grains anxiously into his fist and examined them on

> the palm of his hand; then he put a few into his mouth and chewed them thoughtfully with his eyes closed. He was like a connoisseur sampling wine as he tested his year's work. Finally, he opened his eyes and, rubbing his hands together, declared, “Great stuff, that.”

Indeed, the presence of Taylor's hot-tempered, hard-working, God-fearing father is soundly felt through the pages of her story, a man given to poetry and to singing—but only at Sunday breakfast:

> ...his favorite [song] was “The Old Bog Road”. He would tilt back his chair and, rubbing the back of his head with the palm of his hand, he would rumble “her coffin down the old bog road.” He had a voice like a rusty chain rattling in a bucket but what he lacked in harmony he made up for in enjoyment because he only sang when he was happy.

Another amusing portrait of her father is given in a recollection of his struggle to find tools in a converted “butter box”. “Into this my father had collected a miscellaneous assortment of hammers, wrenches and screwdrivers, together with nails, washers and screws of varying degrees of antiquity.” But, Taylor notes, he never threw anything away “in case it might come in handy in the future”, which meant he could never find what he wanted. This, in turn, resulted in a long and frustrating search for the required nail:

> Many were discarded in a rising tide of frustration and annoyance at their unsuitability until eventually, in a final crescendo of pure anger, the whole box was turned upside down on the kitchen floor.... It was our job to pick up every single item and throw it in the butter box ... and we hated every minute of it, though it was surely a great training in the development of patience.

Taylor's mother is seen as an unassuming figure, hard-working like her husband, sociable, devoutly Catholic, and happily married “to a man who was an excellent husband but whose threshold of tolerance was very low. She thus avoided direct confrontation and quietly outmaneuvered him, believing that in marriage, as in battle, strategy was of all importance.” In contrast with her husband, she possessed an expansive spirit that always made room for other people with whom she loved to talk, “and she would listen to the most boring old crones for hours on end and sympathize with all their sad stories.” Taylor goes on to tell that “Organized planning and good housekeeping were not on the top list of her priorities and it was to people she gave her number one commitment.... Her love and serenity filled the house and she herself was one of the most contented people I ever knew.”

To show her mother's yielding bent, Taylor describes a time when she came home from school into the kitchen “to find a stream of water pouring out the door.” Her mother was baby-sitting for a neighbor's little girl, a child “who was always beautifully dressed...in the middle of the kitchen [mother] had a wheelbarrow full of sand and water; not a little wheelbarrow, mind you, but a large rusty, iron model.” Taylor's mother explained,when asked the reason for the wheelbarrow,that “it was good for children to make a mess and that sand and water was of great benefit to them.”

The book is peopled with other unforgettable folks, such as Nell, the idiosyncratic spinster who “lived in a little house with a sagging thatched roof where birds nested and swallows gathered every year.” Taylor notes that the “house itself was like a birds' nest and so overgrown with greenery that it was always dark inside." Dan, a part-time hired hand, showed up a couple of times a year, but "if conditions did not suit him he just moved on.” A “master of his own destiny”, Dan's parting words were always, “Give me my shirt—I'm going.” Taylor's grandmother was “a tough old woman who did not know the meaning of fear”, and her little brother Connie, “born in the autumn” of her parents' childbearing years, was the author's closest companion. Taylor recalls a time when, after a thorough search of the house and farmyard, the family could not find Connie. Finally, he was discovered in the haybarn nesting with the family sheepdog who had just delivered a litter of puppies. “And there, curled up with the new mother, was Connie, sound asleep, almost indistinguishable from the pups who were draped all over him.” Connie and his sister “slept together in a high old-fashioned timber base and headboard” whose “fluffy tick...had sunken pathways and fairy tunnels and countless hidden possibilities.” But the “child's wonderland” came to an end when Connie became seriously ill and “lay still and quite like a little bird in the middle of the feather bed.” His untimely death was never grasped by his bewildered sister until the day she visited Connie's grave and realized “that heaven was, indeed, a one-way ticket.”

Besides the sense of wholesomeness expressed in a close-knit, rural community where “love thy neighbor” was the underlying code and where hard, meaningful labor was coupled with respect for God's earth, there is also a sense of the tremendous personal freedom the author experienced as a child in her airy, green world where she knew the security of a strong family with father at the head and mother at the heart.

Dillard, whose *American Childhood* is one of eight other titles (one, as mentioned, was a Pulitzer Prize winner), is a child of the city—Pittsburgh, to be precise—and her tale is told as a series of awakenings in the well-wrought and mostly stunning prose for which she is famous. Hers is a post-war, cosmopolitan world where her parents were beautiful people related to old Pittsburgh money, her father being the sort of free spirit who would quit his job with American Standard to go on a riverboat to New Orleans for jazz; her mother being thoroughly modern with her short, stylish blond hair, her Chesterfield cigarettes and modernistic taste in art. What surfaces through the pages of Dillard's story, or explodes, rather, after moving torpedo-like through the early years of childhood, is an enormous and irrepressible sense of wonder, a hunger that cannot be satisfied by upper crust alone with its country clubs, parties, dancing classes and expensive houses. This is a child who would fly, who would study rocks and amoebas, who would devour books, who would draw, who would take to heart the Bible teachings learned at camp and scorned by her fashionable parents. The scene of her sidewalk flight is a celebration both of language and experience:

> I was running down the Penn Avenue sidewalk, revving up for an act of faith. I was conscious and self-conscious. I knew well that people could not fly - as well as anyone knows it—but I also knew...that...with faith all things are possible. Just once I wanted a task that required all the joy I had.... Just this once I wanted to let it rip.... I ran the sidewalk full tilt. I waved my arms ever

> higher and faster; blood balled in my fingertips. I knew I was foolish.

Dillard goes on to say that she understood she was

> too old really to believe in this as a child would, out of ignorance; instead I was experimenting as a scientist would, testing both the thing itself and the limits of my own courage in trying it miserably self-conscious in full view of the whole world.

The flying girl runs across a businessman walking down the sidewalk, a stranger obviously embarrassed by her exuberance. "Who could ever forget this first test, this stranger, this thin young man appalled.... He had refused to meet my exultant eye. He looked away, evidently embarrassed.... What I was letting rip, in fact, was my willingness to look foolish, in his eyes and in my own. Having chosen this foolishness, I was a free being."

The act of flying is wonderfully told:

> My shoulders loosened, my stride opened, my heart banged the base of my throat. I crossed Carnegie and ran up the block waving my arms. I crossed Lexington and ran up the block waving my arms...I crossed Homewood and ran up the block. The joy multiplied as I ran.... I was all but splitting, all but shooting sparks. Blood coursed free inside my lungs and bones, a light-shot stream like air. I couldn't feel the pavement at all.

This extraordinary abandonment is what sets Dillard apart from her family and friends with their weight of tradition and wealth, a society who "didn't buy God" and whose daughters were bored and shallow. Her awe is seen in another jolting passage where she recalls her days of rock-hunting:

> I would lay about me right and left with a hammer, and bash the landscape to bits. I would crack the earth's crust like a piñata and spread to the light the vivid prizes in chunks within. Rock collecting was opening the mountains.... The earth was like a shut eye.... Pry open the thin lid and find a crystalline intelligence inside, a rayed and sidereal beauty. Crystals grew inside rock like arithmetical flowers. They lengthened and spread, adding plane to plane in awed and perfect obedience to an absolute geometry that even the stones—maybe only the stones—understood.

The book abounds with such starburst scenes and takes the reader from Dillard's earliest memories, which are of mother's skin and a strange, spectral light in the child's bedroom (later identified as car lights), to fuller, darker awakenings: Dillard reading Rimbaud, smoking cigarettes, and quitting the insincere Presbyterian church to which she was forced to go though her parents did not (of this church, with its hypocritical and "expensive men and women", she writes, "I knew enough of the Bible to damn these people to hell, citing chapter and verse. My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves"). One perceives that her restlessness and rebellion

signify a quest for something more, something unattained. But it is certain that Dillard's Christian training, acquired at a conservative Presbyterian church camp, created spiritual thirst: “I had a head for religious ideas”, she writes. “They were the first ideas I ever encountered. They made other ideas seem mean.” Her parents, she says, were unaware of the camp's devout character:

> If our parents had known how pious and low church this camp was, they would have yanked us. We memorized Bible chapters, sang rollicking hymns around the clock, held nightly devotions including extemporaneous prayers, and filed out of the woods to chapel twice on Sunday.... The faith-filled theology there was only half a step out of a tent; you could still smell the sawdust...

Despite the differences in spiritual aptitude, however, there is no room to think that Dillard had anything but adoration for her parents—witty, urbane, vibrant, indulgent as they were—and affection for her two younger sisters (though out of spite she nearly drowned baby Molly). Pittsburgh, too, with its colorful history, she loved and knew, and this is told in her book. That, and a child's history—an old dime found in an alley which evokes thoughts of Roman and Spanish gold; the mansions of moguls, “restful as tombs”, around which Annie played with her friends and where one thought of Henry Clay Frick's daughter, “unthinkably old” living “alone in her proud, sinking mansion”; the Carnegie art gallery where she discovered Giacometti's *Man Walking*, the Homewood Library.

For all her brilliance, Dillard lacks Taylor's warmth. But *An American Childhood* is a delightful book which satisfies the curiosity most of us have about life in the upper echelon. Both books of childhood give readers pause to think back on their own beginnings and to say with the psalmist cited in Dillard's introduction, “I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house and the place where dwelleth thy glory” (Psalm 26).