

**Nellie Duffy**  
1899 – 1953



*Miss Duffy*

Nellie Duffy

## Nellie Duffy

Nellie, seventh in the family and christened Ellen, was born in Portmagee, Co Kerry, on December 8th, 1899, where John, her father, had been appointed RIC Sergeant some time before the birth of her sister Margaret Mary (Maggie), in November of the previous year. Nellie and Maggie were the only two of the family born in Portmagee. Nellie, as were her three older sisters, Bridget, Maria, and Maggie, was named after sisters of both of her parents, MaryKate and John.

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1900, six months after she was born, the family moved to live in Glenbeigh where Nellie started school some years later. In 1910, four of the Duffy girls changed from the school, known as Keelnabrack (on the Killorglin side of Glenbeigh), to Glenbeigh Girls' National School (on the Cahirciveen road, about 1km from Glenbeigh), and the latter school records show Nellie starting there on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1910 as well as Maggie, and younger sisters Frances, aged 5, and Tess who had just turned 4 in February. Nellie finished at Glenbeigh National

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School on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1911, a little ahead of her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Maggie, Frances and Tess also left the school on the same date, the reason being the retirement of their father, John, from the RIC in that month.



**Figure 1: All Nellie's younger sisters: from left Tess, Patsy Frances, Jo, Agnes, and Kitty. Nellie back right**

Nellie's national school education was completed in Killorglin, (or 'Puck' as it is known locally), when the family moved there in 1911 after John's retirement. Starting in

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Killorglin National School in October 1911, the register indicates she finished there on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1913. She subsequently went to Loreto Boarding School in Killarney where she received her secondary school education. During these years her three older brothers were away from Ireland, all three being involved in the First World War.



**Figure 2: With schoolfriend, and lifelong friend, Kathleen Rohan (on left)**

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**Figure 3: Nellie Duffy, B.A.**

Having completed her secondary school education Nellie went on to University College Cork, from where she graduated with a B.A. in French in October 1921. Nellie's achievement is likely to have been a major source of family pride: the first girl graduate in the family. Sadly, the joy was short-lived as her dad, John, died just two months later, on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1921, the day before Nellie's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

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**Figure 4: UCC Graduation, October 1921. Nellie, front row, second from right**

Where Nellie taught between 1921 and 1934 is unknown. She may have taught for some time in St Joan of Arc Convent in Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire. Some photos of that school and Croxley, a village near Rickmansworth, were among her memorabilia.

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Nellie started teaching in St Mary's Secondary School, (as it was known at the time), in Kingston-upon-Hull in 1934.



**Figure 5: Early teaching days (Nellie, center front)**



From records at St Mary's, we know Nellie taught there for 18 years up to 1952. The school was established by the Mercy Sisters as a Grammar School for girls in 1905 on Anlaby Road, Hull, and although no longer in that location, the school continues to flourish as St

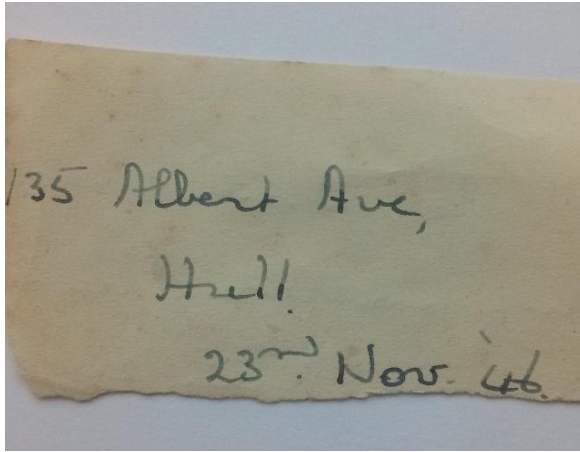


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Mary's College and, now, is one of the biggest Catholic Schools in the U.K., serving more than 2,400, both boys and girls from Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire. It was accredited as a World Class School in 2017 and the school was asked to be one of two lead schools for the World Class School Network in the U.K.

While in Hull, Nellie lived at 135 Albert Avenue. This address, part of a letter in her own handwriting, was found in a little purse in Killorglin. During her years in Hull, she attended mass in the parish of Corpus Christi on Spring Bank West, which a subsequent pupil of hers, Pauline Chatterjee verified, as well as the Albert Avenue address.

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135 Albert Ave,  
Hull.  
23<sup>rd</sup> Nov. 46.

Figure 6: Image of Nellie's address in Hull

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Also in that purse was a little golden disk bearing the names of Mick, her brother, and his wife Marge. This may have been a

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commemorative

wedding souvenir.

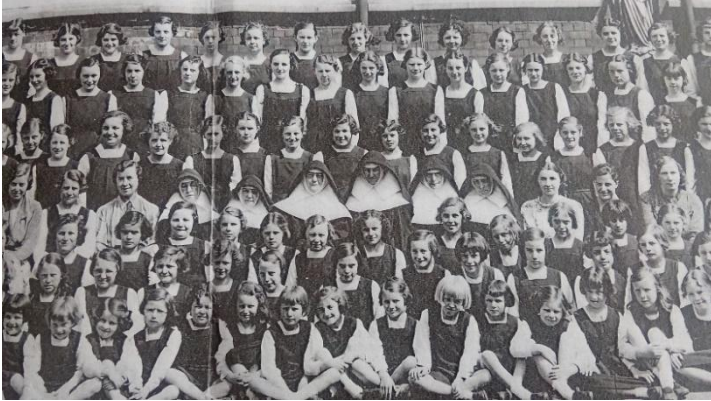
The small green leather purse may possibly have been Mary Kate's or John's. Or indeed it may have been the property of another Duffy family member. We don't know.

A clue as to what Nellie may have done during her holidays comes from a postcard showing a view of Pontoon, Co Mayo, written on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1941, and addressed to her sister Tess, (recently relocated from Clonmel to Wexford with her husband and two children). Pontoon, near Foxford, is situated in one of the most scenic areas of the

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West of Ireland. It is possible that Nellie had previously holidayed here, because there is a little handwritten note on the face of the postcard: 'This view is as old as the Hills'(!)

Nellie was already established in St Mary's when the second World War broke out. The school, among other buildings in the centre of Hull was a target for bombing and was totally destroyed in 1941. Some of the girls were evacuated to Scarborough and to Selby at another time. Nellie was one of the teachers who escorted the evacuees to Scarborough, where they stayed in The Royal Hotel, owned at the time by the family of the actor, Charles Laughton.



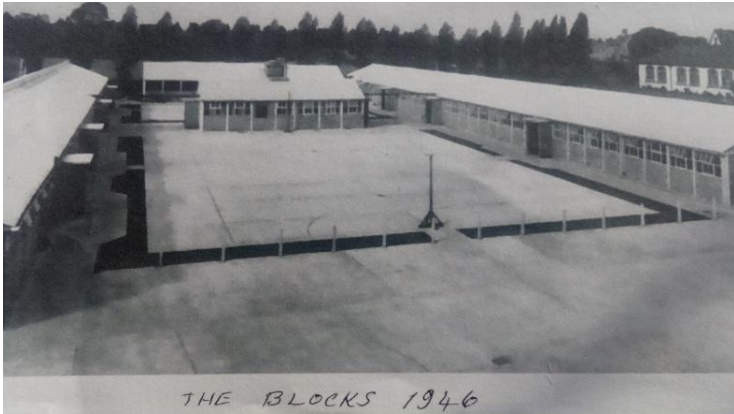
**Figure 8: Part of 1937-38 School Group (Nellie, 4th row, seated on left of group of Mercy Sisters)**

At that time also the Mercy Sisters in Hull had a Teacher Training Centre, some distance from the city centre, on Beverley Road, known now as the Endsleigh Centre. The Training College students were at that time all evacuated, so the remaining St Mary's girls in Hull were able to continue their studies in the Training College buildings. Over the following years The Training Centre gave over some land to St Mary's on which some prefabricated huts were built in 1945 and 1946 to accommodate all the classes. The Training Centre also shared their games facilities with the

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St Mary's girls. After the war a new building was mooted, but 'The Huts' were now home to the girls and their teachers and they remained there for many more years until 1960 when a new school was built nearby in Inglemire Lane. Jean Kirk, a former pupil of Nellie's, contributed a clear memory of classes in 'The Huts':

*'Miss Duffy taught in prefabs behind Endsleigh College, near Endsleigh Convent. You may picture Miss Duffy walking from the staff room - in wind, rain or sunshine - to teachher various classes. In those days, the teachers moved, not the classes, so I'm sure we took a childish delight in seeing staff battle with theweather! There were only two classes and a cloakroom per prefab, so between lessons the staff faced the weather again'*



**Figure 9: 'The Huts'**

St Mary's, moved once more in 1988 to another new building nearby, and in a booklet 'St Mary's High School Hull, Beginnings and Endings 1905-1988', published to mark the transition to the new school, the Governors and Teachers of St Mary's are listed. Miss Duffy is the first named lay teacher following five Mercy sisters and listed after Nellie are a further 200 names of the teachers in St Mary's covering the period 1905-1988.

A copy of a report by H.M Inspectors on St Mary's Secondary School, Kingston-upon-Hull describes an

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inspection carried out at the school on 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1950. It states; *'The teaching ability of the staff as a whole is high. They stimulate the girls, and it is very evident that they form a closely knit team. Those responsible for the appointment and keeping of this staff have good reason to be well-satisfied.'*

*'...Visits, both local and far afield, are numerous; this year a large party of girls and staff went to Rome during the Easter holidays, with a few days in Switzerland as well.'*

*'...The spirit of the girls in this school is outstanding. Their appearance is good, they act in a natural and quite unaffected way, they speak well and fluently. They bubble with vivacity, and yet they exercise a high degree of self-discipline. They are accustomed to freedom, and their education succeeds in making them trustworthy and imaginative citizens by the time that they leave. This is in large part because of the happy relationships between them and the school staff from the Head Mistress downwards.'*

*'...There is an essential unity of spirit in this school between the girls and their mistresses, whether these are members of the Order or not.'*



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*This is, to no small extent, a testimony to the personality of the Head Mistress. The school's success is largely due to her interest in every detail, human and practical, to her warm humanity – and to her great sense of humour'.*

The section of the report which deals with the subject of French, and specifically referring to Nellie, mistress in charge of French, states:

*'The mistress in charge of this subject is a most able and experienced teacher. She shares the work with two no less competent assistants. All three are excellent linguists.*

*'...Meticulous care is given to accent and intonation and it is rare indeed to find a school where the standard of pronunciation is so uniformly high. Good use is made of music and drama.*

*'...Work in the Sixth Form consists mainly of preparation for examinations. The good grounding that the girls have received in the technicalities of language stands them in good stead...'*

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Prior to their exams the girls would go to the College Chapel to pray they would do well. Gwen Leaper (later Staveley), one of Nellie's pupils who went on to become a French teacher herself, recalls worrying about her final school examinations and praying about it. Gwen, with a warm smile, remembers clearly Miss Duffy's dry quip on this practice: 'Don't expect God to achieve with five minutes prayer what you should have done in five years' work!'

Many of the following anecdotes and memories of life at St Mary's and of 'Miss Duffy' came about as a direct result of the efforts of a former pupil of Nellie's, Jean Kirk. When Jean learned of the attempt to trace Nellie's time in Hull, she made contact with a number of other 'Old Girls', and helped set up a meeting of these in Hull in December 2006. Jean also corresponded with others who had moved away from Hull and collected many of the stories which follow. Without exception these recollections reflect on Nellie as a warm approachable and fair teacher who had high

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standards for herself and expected the same of her pupils. This was capped by a high degree of practicality. Her French accent was more than excellent. Girls were subsequently complimented on their accents and more than once it was suggested that, surely, they must have been taught by a French native. She encouraged the use of French as a spoken language and engendered a great love for French among most, if not all, of her pupils. Several of her pupils went on to study French at higher levels and become teachers themselves. Others had a lifelong love of French. Miss Duffy, they said, was always very smartly dressed, (Pauline Chatterjee, 1945-1950, particularly admired 'a dark green Hebe suit'), walked in a very upright way and always had her hair in a 'French pleat'.

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**Figure 10: Miss Duffy, much loved teacher, front row centre**

And now for some recollections from the 5 ‘Old Girls’ who assembled in the Endsleigh Training Centre on Beverley Road, Hull, on Sunday afternoon, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006 to help build Nellie’s story. The ‘girls’ included Ann Gardiner, (nee McGuire), Pauline Kirby, Shirley Wilson, Joan Watts, and Gwen Leaper. Joan and Gwen both said they owed their careers to Nellie for both had taught French all their lives. All had also gone to school in ‘The Huts’ and despite the spartan physical facilities in ‘The Huts’ had nothing but warm memories of their time there.



**Figure 11: Four of the ‘Old Girls who attended the ‘reunion’ on Dec 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (From left: Front Row: Pauline Kirby, Anne McGuire, Joan Watts. Back row, right hand side: Shirley Wilson. (Nora Hanratty on left of Shirley)**

Pauline Kirby had a very clear memory of a school tour to Lourdes during the Easter Holidays of 1952, followed by 3 days in Paris, all led by Miss Duffy. A Fr Clifford also accompanied them, joining the group, perhaps, at the last minute. Because there were not enough seats for

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everybody on the bus Fr Clifford had to stand, at least for some of the time. As they journeyed through France the (French) bus driver stopped to ask directions. Apparently, the driver had difficulty in understanding what he was told. Nellie intervened, got, and, of course, understood, the directions. The girls were most impressed!

Shirley Wilson reminiscing on her former French teacher says she was *'a consummate professional'*. Shirley also subsequently wrote, at some length: *'Always most elegant and dignified she (Miss Duffy) commanded our respect without our questioning her discipline...I think that even now she would find a way of creating her own atmosphere in the classroom'* Shirley added: *'she (Miss Duffy) never raised her voice'*.

Shirley feels she *'irritated Miss Duffy intensely by taking liberties with the French language, carried away with enthusiasm. Thus: "Miss Duffy, I think you have deducted more than one mark for each mistake, (that means) I would have a minus mark"*. *"Yes, Shirley Wilson, but they were **VERY BAD** mistakes" (!)*

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Friends of Shirley, who worked in France later, subsequently reported that the girls had been taught a very good precise Parisian accent. Shirley also remembers learning French songs such as *Plaisirs d'Amour*, but does not recall how they learned the music. They sang 'La Marseillaise' at the beginning of each lesson during the War, probably up to D. Day, and Shirley remembers the girls buying small silver *Croix de Lorraine* tie pins sold in aid of the Free French.

After leaving school Shirley did not study French formally, but has enjoyed a lifelong love of the language and of French literature, and reads French fluently. Shirley herself was a teacher of English at Wolfreton School and concluded her reminiscences by saying *'It would have been wonderful to have had Miss Duffy for a colleague'*.



**Figure 12: St Mary's, c.1950**  
**2nd row, fifth from left: Shirley Wilson;**  
**Back row, extreme right, Molly Taylor**

Some former pupils who couldn't attend the December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006 gathering submitted written memories and anecdotes. These include Pauline Chaterjee, mentioned already, Pat Gill and Molly Taylor. Pat left school to work but some years later decided to resume her French studies with a view to going to university. Nellie tutored her privately and in 2007 Pat wrote of that time with Nellie: *"whom I was so lucky to have as an excellent French teacher and friend. I read French at Oxford thanks to her. 'Miss Duffy' was an exceptionally nice*



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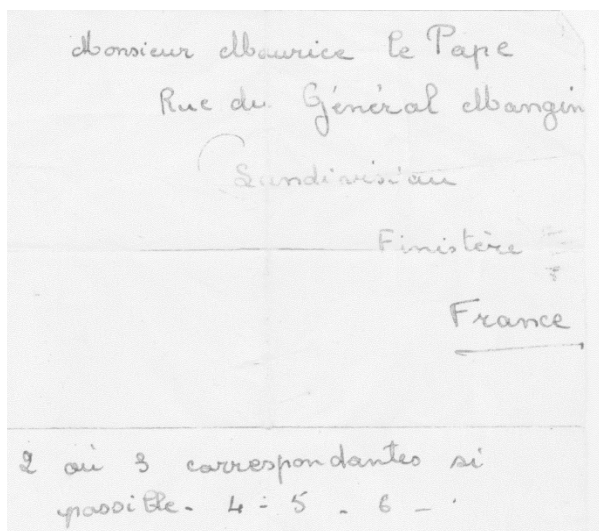
*woman in every way and it was a great sadness for all concerned that she died in mid-life. I met her sister when she came to Hull to take her back to Ireland.”* Pat also recollected that when the ‘Free French’ came to Hull, Nellie socialised with them and probably helped them also.

Molly Taylor, later Molly Le Pape, writes in a letter to Jean Kirk (Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006):

*Now a few details concerning Miss Duffy and myself... Miss Duffy was my French mistress; I can remember her as a gentle, rather genteel elegant lady, particularly smart when dressed as an honorary officer in the Girls’ Training Corps. This movement was part of the school’s war effort as was the Association des Volontaires Français to which Miss Duffy belonged. This Service linked local Hull families with the Free French Forces. Many a time my parents accepted to host members of the latter, and these visits gave me an opportunity to talk French.*

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*Strangely enough, though we had nicknames for all the other teachers and the nuns but we always referred to Miss Duffy as 'Miss Duffy'. French was my favourite subject and in June 1946 Miss Duffy suggested I ought to have a French pen-friend. She handed me a scruffy piece of paper on which there was a Frenchboy's address near Brest. Little did I think that this piece of paper would transform my whole life!*



**Figure 13: Copy of “the scruffy piece of paper” with Maurice’s home address (Rue du Général Mangin, Landivisiau, Finistère, France). Original retained and treasured by Molly and Maurice throughout their lives**

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*This address had travelled from France via a convent in Ilfracombe... Over the years we exchanged many letters and we first met when he (Maurice) came to stay in England in 1948 spending two days in Hull. To cut a long story short: in 1952 I worked for an English Bank in Paris where at last I became bilingual. The same year I was able to introduce my French pen-friend, Maurice Le Pape, now my boy-friend, to Miss Duffy who was visiting Paris with a school group. The following year, July 1953, I married my former French pen-friend, thereby becoming "Madame Maurice Le Pape". How often, since then, I remember Miss Duffy's rules for French grammar, particularly for that bothersome subjunctive or those difficult past participles.'*

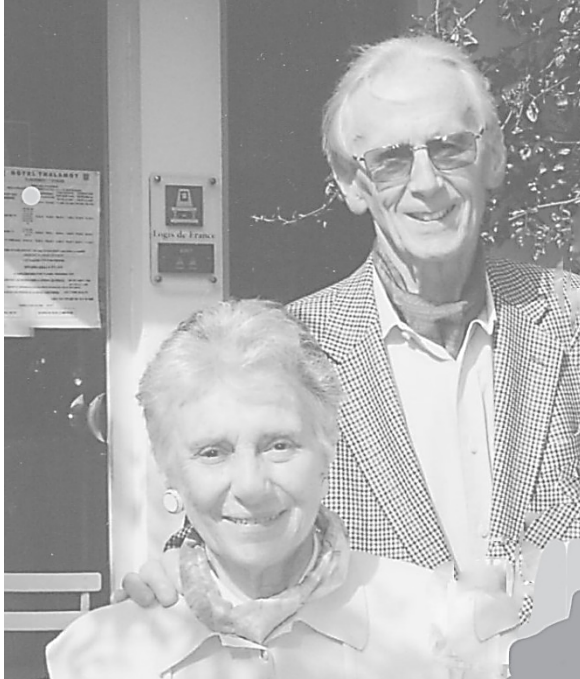
On subsequent visits to France, Liam and Nora Hanratty (nee O'Callaghan) met Molly and Maurice in Plougastel-Daoulas, near Brest where they lived out their lives, Maurice dying in 2018 and Molly in 2019. R.I.P. Molly was one of the schoolchildren who was sent to

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Scarborough during the war. She was an only child and her parents feared for her safety in Hull. Nellie was one of the teachers looking after them in their Royal Hotel lodgings, and school life continued there as it would have had they been in Hull. Molly loved to talk about all her school days and her friends, but particularly relished ‘Miss Duffy’s’ horror at the Hull girls’ pronunciation of ‘*Boulevard*’ in French! Molly also said she remembered Nellie telling them that animals in different countries had different ‘accents’! The girls thought that was very funny and didn’t really believe it. However, after Molly went to live in France, she said it was quite true that cats did ‘miouw’ in a more nasal way than their English counterparts and that “*truly indeed, French domestic animals sounded off in a different way*”! Maurice told us that on the occasion he and Molly met Nellie in Paris he invited Nellie to have a drink with them and she chose a *Benedictine*. Maurice was surprised at her choice; apparently it was an unusual one for a woman in France at the time, being a more common drink for men. When Molly heard, (in recent years), that Nellie had three

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brothers who had fought in the First World War, she commented that *Benedictine* was a popular choice for soldiers returning home after the war to bring with them, it being a typically French drink which reminded them of their time in France. So, it is possible Nellie may have first tasted it at home in Killorglin...



**Figure 14: Molly and Maurice Le Pape, 2009**

Valerie, also a former pupil, remembers a school trip to Italy in 1950. Miss Duffy, who spoke some Italian, and the girls were travelling in the same compartment as some Italians who began to talk about the war. The atmosphere in the compartment became very icy when Miss Duffy realised the Italians were pro-Mussolini. Valerie reported:

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*‘Miss Duffy’s eyebrows went up and up’, till Valerie thought ‘they would reach the roof’!*



**Figure 15: Jean Kirk who helped set up the meeting of St Mary’s ‘Old Girls’, in Hull, December 2006**

Another former pupil, Mary Rainey in Form 4 at the time, remembers visiting Nellie in hospital in Hull with all the other Form 4 girls. Nellie’s response to the large group’s arrival in the hospital was ‘What did I do to deserve this?’ She was thrilled to see them. Another former pupil, Mary

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O'Brien, 87 years of age in 2006, had left St Mary's before the World War 2 but remembered 'Miss Duffy' very well.

It may have been about 1951 or '52 that Nellie developed breast cancer. Her sister Patsy came to Hull to help her on her journey home to Killorglin where her sister Jo and husband Patrick O'Regan provided a home and cared for her until she died on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1953 at the age of 53. She is buried in the family grave in Glenbeigh. May she rest in peace.

An article in St Mary's school magazine of 1952-53 spoke of her departure:

*'La triste nouvelle de la retraite de Mademoiselle Duffy au début de cette année scolaire à cause de sa santé, nous a profondément ému ; et nous voulons lui exprimer notre reconnaissance affectueuse pour ses dix-huit années de travail entre nous. Nous espérons qu'elle gardera des souvenirs précieux de son séjour à Hull, et nous lui envoyons tous nos meilleurs vœux, tout en lui assurant que nous ne l'oublions jamais dans nos prières'.*



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The 1953-54 school magazine noted her death and the editor wrote (January 1954):

*'Miss Duffy died last May. R.I.P. Those members of the School who had the privilege of knowing her intimately as a colleague had a deep respect and affection for her. She was a courageous woman always, but never more so than in her last months. She loved life and clung to it, yet, when told by her doctor that she would not recover, she met the news with equanimity, and calmly settled down to her last task – that of preparing for her death – with the efficiency and thoroughness that characterised all her actions. We extend our heartfelt sympathy to all her relations and friends.'*

On page 27 of the same magazine, pupil Jean Kirk, then in Upper VI, under the heading of “Nos Activités Françaises”, wrote:

*'Au mois de juin, la triste nouvelle de la mort de notre chère Miss Duffy nous est parvenue. Pendant des années, elle a rendu grande service à notre école, et elle a conquis tous nos coeurs, en nous donnant*

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*un grand amour pour le français. À sa famille nous offrons nos sincères condoléances. Qu'elle repose en paix.*

Jean Kirk, in 2006, reflecting on Nellie's death, said she was, on behalf of all Miss Duffy's pupils, *'blessed with the task of sending a letter to her family after the news of her death, whether in French or English I can't remember'*.

Summers of the 1940s and 50s saw the O'Callaghan family holidaying in Cromane (near Killorglin). Most of them recall Nellie visiting and remember she used a stick to aid her walk. This was possibly in 1952. Brendan and John remember that she and their other visiting Duffy aunts all smoked - the cigarette of choice for all being Craven A! One of Nellie's Dublin nieces, Lucie Duffy, remembers her aunt as 'lovely and very different to her other aunts'.

At some stage during her final illness Nellie visited Agnes and Tony O'Callaghan's home in Castleisland for a short break. She was knitting beautiful summer cardigans at the

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time for Mary and Nora in a colour popular in Europe to this day: a distinctive shade of mustard! She had finished Nora's and had started Mary's when she died. (Agnes finished the knitting sometime later).

Nellie, the first of five girl teachers in the Duffy family, was warmly remembered by her pupils, colleagues, and siblings throughout their lives. May she rest in peace.

## Addendum

Following recent contact with St Mary's in relation to the proposed circulation of this story, a notice was posted on the school media. Subsequently in December 2020, I was surprised and delighted to receive emails from Julia Mulchinock and Donna Watts, both daughters of Joan Watts who was one of the 'Old Girls' who came to the meeting in 2006. These emails are printed, with permission, below.

*Dear Nora,*

*I am just contacting you as I have seen a post on the St. Mary's College Facebook site regarding a story you are ready to share about your Aunt, Miss Duffy.*

*My Mum's name, Joan Watts (nee Cleary), was listed on the post who I know you met a good few years ago, at Endsleigh to discuss your Aunt. I remember Mum telling me all about meeting you and that she was absolutely delighted to meet you.*

*Unfortunately, my Mum died last year after sadly suffering with dementia for many years. But I felt compelled to write to you to say I*

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*would love to add that all my life, and my sister`s, we have heard about Miss Duffy and how much our Mum admired her and was, most definitely, the best teacher Mum ever had. Mum always said if it wasn`t for Miss Duffy she would never have had the skills, or aspiration, to speak French and then later become a French teacher herself. I am sure that Mum said your Aunt had studied at the Sorbonne which impressed Mum incredibly. Even by today`s standard, I would imagine gaining an entrance to the Sorbonne is practically impossible never mind the early 1900s.*

*I will finish now, Nora, by wishing you all the very best with everything. Mum would have loved to have read your story, as my sister and I would too.*

*Take care and stay safe in these difficult times.*

*Warm wishes,*

*Julia Mulchinock (nee Watts)*

*Good afternoon Nora,*

*I'm Joan's second daughter, Donna, and I just wanted to reiterate what my sister Julia wrote regarding your Aunt, Miss Duffy. It brings back warm memories to us of how our Mum always spoke about her*

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*teacher, Miss Duffy with such great respect and admiration. We regularly heard stories throughout our childhood and adult lives about Miss Duffy and what an inspiration she was to our Mum. It really is thanks to your dear Aunt that our Mum became a great French teacher herself.*

*I would go as far as saying that indirectly it's also thanks to your Aunt that I'm where I am today: As our Mum was a French teacher, Julia and I grew up surrounded by French culture, going to France for holidays and I ended up falling in love with the language and studying French. To cut a very long story short, I have been living in France for almost 40 years now and have even acquired dual nationality.*

*Your dear Aunt's memory lives on and her name will always remain imprinted in our minds and hearts.*

*Wishing you all the best for 2021, stay safe and take care.*

*Tous mes meilleurs vœux et prenez soin de vous!*

*Donna Watts*

**Acknowledgements:**

- Finola Cronin, Killorglin, Co Kerry, Miss Duffy's niece, for photos and other family memorabilia.
- St Mary's 'Old Girls' I met in Hull, Dec 2006: Jean Kirk (nee Carrick), Joan Watts (nee Cleary), Gwen Staveley (nee Leaper), Shirley Wilson, Pauline Ashurst (nee Kirby), and Ann McGuire.
- Correspondence, anecdotes and memories from Pauline Chatterjee, Pat Gill, Mary O'Brien, Mary Rainey, Agnes Codd, Valerie, and also from Miss Duffy's former colleagues: Srs Imelda, John, and Susan, Gabriel Lockett, and Miss Jean Harris.
- Molly Taylor, later Molly le Pape, and her husband Maurice.
- Mr Chris Cuthill, former Chaplain to St Mary's who helped with old records.
- Ailbhe Smyth, for assistance with French translations.
- Maryann and Marc Hanratty for help in getting Nellie's story ready for printing.

Nora Hanratty

Galway

December 2020