

BIOGRAPHIES CAN BE MISLEADING

Peter Farrell followed the porter up the stairs of the hotel. The porter unlocked the bedroom door and ushered him inside. He deposited Peter's bag on a wooden stand and left, closing the door behind him.

Farrell admired the spacious room with its high ceilings and clean towels. There was only one thing wrong. The hearth was littered with tobacco ash and cigar-ends. He sat down on a chair feeling very tired. His heart had been giving him trouble again. He regretted the rather energetic walk he had taken earlier in the day.

Although he was a well-known writer, Farrell did not have many friends. He was known to the public only by his books. His appearance and life were a complete mystery to the public and to his fellow writers. For example, many people did not know that he had no interest in music or religion.

Farrell rested for a while and then started to unpack his suitcase. Everything was placed neatly in an appropriate drawer or cupboard. He put four paperback books in Italian on a table near the bed. He lifted the long Italian cigars, sniffed them with disgust, and placed them in a drawer. Then he lifted a newly-bound Bible which had a lot of annotations and had clearly been used a lot. He placed it disinterestedly in another drawer. Finally he lifted some classical music which had apparently been annotated by a famous pianist. Neither his name nor the notes meant anything to Farrell.

When he had finished unpacking, he started to write a letter:

"I arrived here earlier today and in three days time I will head for Ireland. I have done all the jobs that you asked me to do. I have bought your Italian cigars and their dreadful smell has already infected my clothes. I had your wife's Bible bound in the way that she requested. I am also bringing home some classical music with accompanying notes for Brenda to play when I am not in the house. Thanks for your list of younger Italian writers. Unfortunately so far I have not found any of them to my taste."

After addressing the letter, Farrell posted it in the hall on the way to the dining room. He found himself sharing a table with the only Englishman in the hotel. Farrell liked him and they had an interesting conversation. They continued their conversation over coffee in the lounge. But Farrell's heart started to bother him again. Feeling somewhat scared, he realised that he should not have gone on that hilly walk during the day. In future he would confine himself to flat surfaces. He would have to take it easy for a few days. He rose slowly from his chair, and, ordering his tea and toast for 9.00am the next morning, made his way carefully up to bed.

When the waiter knocked on his door the next morning with his tea and toast, Farrell did not reply. The waiter entered the room and put the tray down on a table near the bed. The Irish gentleman was asleep. In the twilight the waiter could see his motionless hands and

face and the somewhat dishevelled bed-clothes. He went to the window and pulled back the curtains. When he turned back towards the bed, the waiter had quite a shock. The Irish gentleman was not asleep; he was dead. There was no doubt about it. In a flustered state, the waiter left the room, locking the door behind him.

When investigating the sudden and unexpected death, the authorities consulted the Englishman who had shared a table with Farrell the night before. He was the only person in the hotel who knew anything about him. And he had only known him for a couple of hours.

In Ireland the announcement of Farrell's death produced predictable results. Daily, weekly and monthly publications printed critical articles about his work. A few personal reminiscences appeared. The Englishman who had seen Farrell both alive and dead in the hotel was asked to contribute his experiences. He wrote:

“As I only met Farrell for a couple of hours, it may seem strange that I should presume to write about his life and habits. However I was present at the inspection of his personal belongings soon after his death, and this enabled me to find out a few details about his tastes and habits.

As he did not smoke after our dinner together, I was very surprised to discover that he was an inveterate smoker. In his bedroom cigar –ash and several cigar- ends lay in the grate.

It will surprise those familiar with his writings to learn that actually Farrell was a very religious man. He carried with him a Bible which showed evidence of constant use.

He was a keen student of modern Italian literature. By his bed there was a list of modern Italian writers that he had read.

It is not generally known that Farrell was a keen musician; however it is clear from his luggage that he had studied some of the world's most famous composers.

I now realise how rash it is to assess a writer's personality from his writings.”

In view of the lack of information generally available about Farrell, the Englishman's article proved invaluable when the official biography of the man was written some years later.

Eric Browett

March 2009