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EIGHTY YEARS A REBEL

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By JOSEPH McCABE

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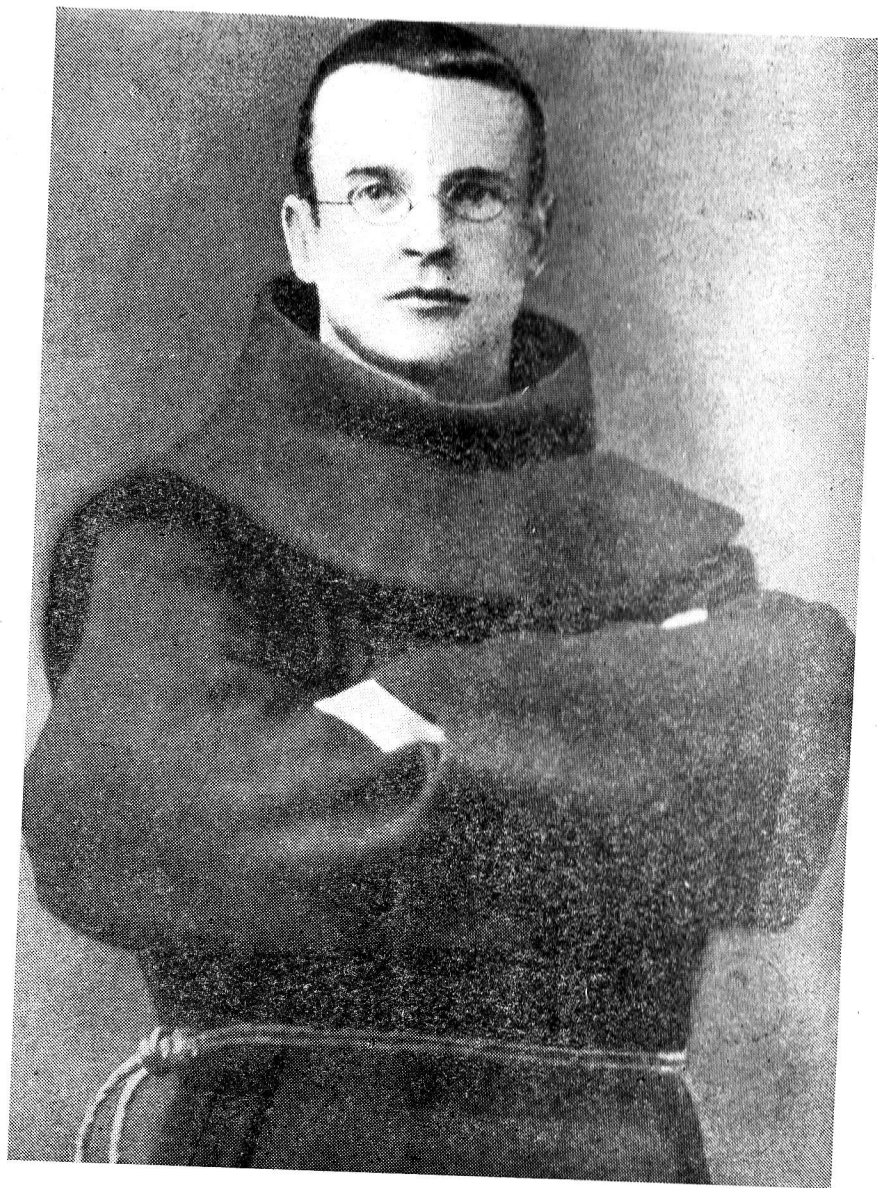
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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VERY REV. FR. ANTONY
(Two months before quitting monastery)



JOSEPH MCCABE TODAY, AT 80



JOSEPH MCCABE'S COTTAGE, AT 22 ST., GEORGE'S ROAD, GOLDERS GREEN,
LONDON, ENGLAND

1. THE FIRST LESSON

It is time to tell the story of my life. The bell that counts the passing hours, the years, of a man's life will soon break upon my ears with an inexorable 80 strokes. How often I have heard its note; flinging its music merrily upon the air at first, changing to a manly vibrancy in my prime, mellowing and deepening with age as if it were preparing to deliver the solemn parting knell. Not that I have yet detected any warning that I must presently "wrap the drapery of my couch about me and lie down to pleasant dreams." The memory of an old man is like that of a traveler who returns from a foreign land. Behind him the vista grows dim and contracts, like the slow fade-out of a picture on the screen. And if that is truly characteristic of age my mind is still young. Vivid in my recollection is the first experience that enduringly scarred my mind when, at the age of 4, I saw a great flood encircle and invade my home; and the long train of moving experiences I have had since that date, 76 years ago, are as clear to me as are the foothills from the mountain top. So I would set them down before the haze creeps over them or the acid of senility sours them.

If this were the story of a monotonous and too familiar career, the slow advance along a narrow groove from the cradle to the grave, it would not be worth recording. But accidents of my earlier life made me a wanderer over the earth, a gleaner in the whole field of man's knowledge and close observer of his behavior, and gave a rich color and variety to my pilgrimage. Sixty years of study and writing, usually on seven days out of seven, widened the horizon until I steadily saw this drama of the life of the race as the culmination, to date, and with an immeasurably longer and brighter prospect before it, of the portentously slow uplift of life from the slime of a small globe that basks in the light and heat of one of a billion suns in one of a billion universes. I was impatient to understand every aspect of the drama and the theater so, not eating my way foot by foot through the shelves of a library, as Edison did, nor confining myself to one section, as the expert must, I looked over the vast area of human knowledge and garnered methodically in every field, collecting facts as some collect postage stamps or books or dollars. At the age of 23 the series of lucky accidents that make up my life made me, in a small world, a professor of philosophy, and I constructed the frame of a theory of life into which each new fact of science or history found its place. I became, naturally, a peddler in culture, writing, I think, more books than any other living author—more than 200, at all events—and delivering some 3,000 or 4,000 lectures in cities that dot the map from Vancouver to Invercargill.

But more appealing to me than the stimulating truth of science or the pageant of history was, always, the drama of life today, in this hour of dark confusion between the death of an old and tragic past and the birth of a new and cleaner age. Still one of my few pleasures is a sort of aloof contact with my fellows, mingling with them and watching their faces in the crowded streets. I have visited hundreds of cities, in a score of lands, and have found more interest in the faces of the people than in their historic monuments or the modern achievements in which they take such pride. In friendly, often intimate, conversation I have met most types of men and women—countesses and their dress-makers, abbesses and cocottes, barons and bishops and butchers, miners and millionaires, heads of states and universities and learned societies. I have lectured in churches and universities, in asylums for the insane

and hobo-colleges, in slums and in drawing rooms on Fifth Avenue. And through it all I felt the mood of cold dispassionate rebellion at the slowness of the march of man, the narrow horizon, the filmy vision of present realities, the blindness to the richer world beyond the hills. So this is the story of a rebel.

But I must launch myself upon my career before I dare claim that my experiences equipped me to be something of a guide to my fellows. One of the truths to which I have held fast against the impact of new fashions in science is that a man's inheritance counts for little in his type of manhood, and this is now regarded as sound psychology. But so many are still interested in the womb from which a man came that I begin with what little I know about the English, Irish, and even Scottish strains that contributed to my blood.

The name McCabe, or Mac-Ab, means Son of the Abbot and puts my clan back in the days, before the 12th century, when even abbots might marry and rear large families in the fear of God and the devil. It is said in some Irish works that in time one family of these Sons of the Abbots became kings of Kerry, but Norman Moore, the learned Celtic scholar, told me that they were pipers to the kings of Kerry. He mockingly sympathized with me on my loss of royal lineage, but I assured him that, knowing what disreputable ruffians these petty Irish kings were, I gladly surrendered my poor shreds of purple and felt that perhaps it was the distant call of the piper in my blood that better explained my itch to make a noise in the world.

The immediate founder of my dynasty was one William McCabe who was steward of Lord Leitrim in Dublin in the closing years of the 18th century. Family folk-lore had it that he was press-ganged for the French war, and when they found that they had caught an exceptionally educated man in the net they made him paymaster of Nelson's fleet. Such, at all events, he was, as an extant paysheet of the *Victory* testifies. He left a son, Thomas, to treasure and add to his little library. Hanging on the wall in the home of my childhood was a case of books, worn with age, such as not one working man in 10,000 would have in the first half of the 19th century. I remember a slim early volume of Emerson's "Essays," Paley's "Evidences," a Cyclopaedia of the Arts and Sciences . . . But in the early forties fate dealt Ireland the blow from which it has never recovered, the Potato Famine, and scattered its people over the world. Thomas McCabe packed up his books and his children and embarked upon one of the stinking little tubs that crossed the churlish Irish Sea. Liverpool's vacant spaces were already full of fugitives, and he somehow—it was before the era of railways—got to the small silk-weaving town of Macclesfield 40 miles away, where his eldest son, William Thomas, my father, learned to ply the handloom and where, some years later, he met and married the dark and slender Scottish-English girl Harriet Kirk, my mother.

There was some romance in the meeting. While William McCabe was penning grave long letters on the stirring Mediterranean events—some fool who married into the family gave them to her baby to tear up and relieve its temper—in a cubby-hole of the *Victory*, my maternal great-grandfather, Captain Hill, a British soldier of yeoman stock, spluttering patriotism and piety with hallowed fierceness, was fighting radicalism and rebellion in London. The one heirloom my mother bequeathed me was his sword, and many a day when I played about her knees she told me with pride how her grandfather had been sent with a troop to arrest a notable villain and traitor named Tom Paine, and how he angrily drove the sword into Paine's bed when he found that the ruffian had fled. Paine, secretly warned, did in fact fly from London to France in 1791. In the course of time a roving Scot named Kirk, a dark figure in the family annals, invaded the comfortable farm of the Hills in Lincolnshire and carried off one of the daughters. My friend Charles Goss, curator of the Bishopsgate Institute, once traced him for me as a trader in the Leadenhall Market in London. But his feet itched

again, and he set out, now traveling in a canal boat, for the north-west, and his wife and daughter reached Macclesfield. They were staunch Protestants, but love laughs at creeds and melts their walls.

Children came rapidly, in the ancient way; first still-born twins, then a girl who died in infancy, then four sons and four daughters, who all lived to be over 60. I was the second son, born on St. Martin's Day, November 11, 1867. My mother, still glowing with the zeal of a convert—which, indeed, she never lost—would have one of that revered caste, the priesthood, in the family, and since it was reputed that the surest way to effect this was to put a new-born babe under the patronage of St. Joseph, I became Joseph Martin. What the greater Joseph thinks of me today I do not yet know.

A weaver's wage could not bear the strain, and mother opened a milliner's shop in the main street; and often did she tell me, warmly, how when she was abed with an almost annual new baby my father, after the day at the loom, would bring the hat-making materials to the bedside and under her directions make the hats for her customers. When I was 2 or 3 years old he secured the post of overseer or sub-manager of a small mill in Manchester, 20 miles away, and the molding influence of the city began. It is part of my creed that not only do pre-natal influences normally count for comparatively little in the making of a man but that real education, the fixing of those "sets" or attitudes that give him what we call his character, seriously begins after the age of 16 or so. It is one of the hampering illusions of the race to put such mighty faith in primary and secondary schooling and then set nine children out of ten adrift in a world of chaotic and contradictory messages in which the little of value that they had learned in school is speedily submerged. Yet I am disposed to recognize some lifelong influence of the great northern city in the creation of the order and industry of mind to which I owe such success as I have had.

It seems that the spirit of rebellion also then began. I might, indeed, with a little strain claim that I was born a rebel. Years later, visiting a silk-mill in Macclesfield, I encountered an elderly woman who said that she had been my nurse in my first year, and she affirmed that I was the noisiest brat she had ever known. I rebelled against life, it seems, from the moment my eyes opened upon it. I at all events rebelled at the age of 5. The most distant event stored in what might be called my dim prehistoric memory is of a great flood that covered a large area of the city. The second—though this has doubtless often been refreshed by my mother's talk—is of a day when I was taken to one of those cottage-schools in which some almost illiterate widow used at that time to earn \$2 or \$3 a week by "teaching." I piped so loudly and incurably that they had to send me home.

Soon afterwards my father moved to an industrial suburb of the city, West Gorton, where the growing brood would have a Catholic school at hand; which brought a deeper influence into my young life. Facing our new house, across the narrow street, were the church and monastery of St. Francis. The church, a handsome Gothic structure designed by the distinguished Catholic architect Pagin, rose, narrowly, high above the squalid clusters of houses and etched itself in my mind. The mysterious monastery, from which the brown-robed Franciscan monks issued to the church, intrigued and for many years, strange as it may seem, faintly repelled me. The time came when I had to take its daily supply of milk from my father's shop but, though often pressed to do so, I would never venture beyond the vestibule. I did not, and do not now, know why. It would be false and absurd to pretend that I had a premonition of the hypocrisy of its profession of austere virtue. The dozen "Fathers" ("They are called Fathers because they often are," I read half a century later in Erasmus), barrel-shaped or gaunt, jovial or stern, were, I learned from my elders, especially my mother, saints in the terrestrial phase. In time, when I became a

monk and priest of their Order, I met them undisguised . . . But that will come later. I attended their elementary schools for eight years and served at their altars with white-hot juvenile zeal.

Let me say at once, shamelessly, because most of my readers will be old friends of my books and will expect the simple realism I preach, that I not only headed every class in which I ever sat—in school, college, and university—thanks to an exceptionally good memory and a love of study, but I was in my behavior almost a model boy. Indeed when I first heard the story of Elisha in a Bible lesson I wondered, next time I knelt in childish rapture at the altar, whether the roof would not open and a fiery chariot come for me.

Home influence made me so instinctively truthful, honest, and well-behaved that I rarely strayed. Just once in a year or so my buttocks tingled from the thin cane with which my father taught us virtue, for he was deadly just; and once the schoolmaster—a tubby, sterling, fine-natured little Irishman, whom out of earshot we called "Judy" McCarthy—laid his thicker cane upon the palms of my hands. One winter's day the ice on a nearby pond had tempted a score of us to stay, sliding, a half hour after the school opened. The 19 marched automatically to the punishment spot while I, just as automatically, went to my seat. To my astonishment the master called me out and caned me; and it was obviously more painful to him than to me. My mother had seen me lagging and, Spartan as she was in the cause of virtue and knowing that I was the master's favorite as well as hers, she had gone to the school and bullied the poor master until he promised to punish me.

These were rare ruffles of the tranquil course of my early life. My home was moderately comfortable, quietly irradiated by the typical healthy Irishman of the upper working class, my father: industrious (this perhaps a little beyond the Irish standard), temperate, faithful, brimming to the lips with good humor and readiness to laugh. He neither smoked nor swore—just two of his few stories contained one swear-word each—but liked his beer. A memory of the graver interests of his father and grandfather remained with him. He took up photography and had a herbarium; and he sometimes took me to a museum or a classical concert. But the burden of life was heavy, for his wage never rose above \$10 a week, and his loyal discharge of the duties he had brought upon himself and the kindness with which he eased our paths have enshrined him in my memory. Enshrined too is the pale thin face, with furrowed brows and brown eyes that reflected the strain of the life of my mother. Her piety had no sourness, nor did years of illness and heavy toil and anxiety ever spoil her even temper. They were never happier than when they saw their children happy at Christmas or on some other holiday.

We were not "poor" as incomes were then counted; just, perhaps, on the outer fringe of the working class. Our home was in the best row of houses in the district, but you rented a six-roomed house in those days for \$2 a week. But the strain of the growing family told, and my father moved to the little corner shop of the poorer row of houses behind ours, where my parents eked out the slender weekly wage by selling a variety of things from beer to bacon and potatoes. By the age of 12 I took my share in the work, learning to cut bacon and cheese and butter, going to market in the city to buy a hundred Irish eggs or to a distant butcher to select a small mound of pork chops on which we made a meager profit. The work lodged in my memory impressions that are part of the fuel of my rebellion. Regularly employed and sober workers, though probably none made more than \$7 a week, working 10 hours a day, bought freely and had accounts. But a nickel or a dime was the common expenditure, and there was a painful volume of 2c purchases of food. And as I grew older and looked wider over and deeper into the grim district I even then understood why.

Many a time in later life workers in the Labor movement, hearing me lecture on science in civic halls to 2,000 or 3,000 folk or applying

ethical principles broadly to social problems, told me how they regretted that I had never been in close contact with the life of the workers. I had for years seen life rawer than most of them ever see it today. For one of my books, "A Century of Stupendous Progress," I had to make a minute study of the life of the workers, especially those of the industrial north of England, in the year 1825. I knew well from what lower depth these Manchester folk of the 70's of the last century had risen, though at the time I was too young to dream of a comparison with either past or future. It was the order of nature, or of God. The Owenite Socialism of 40 years earlier was as dead as Napoleon. An Owenite lecturer of that earlier date tells how he had to lecture in my district of Manchester. He saw a crowd of men streaming in the direction of the hall, and he nervously asked one if they were going to the lecture. No, the man said in the dialect of our district—"t' t' dog-feight." In that respect the mass of the workers in the 70's were more leaden than they had been before 1848.

Reflecting on the ghastly picture I can conjure up, sharply enough, today, I easily understand it. For the majority life benumbed the mind; for a large number it was brutalizing. We McCabes were not counted poor, but eight of us lived in a four-roomed house, and one room was the shop. Fifty families lived in the remaining dirty brick-boxes with slate roofs of the row or block. It was back to back, separated by a narrow passage, with the row of larger houses, and the privy of each was at the bottom of the small flagged yard—an open muck-heap. There was, except in the monastery and the house of the Protestant minister, not a bath or a *water* closet in a square mile of congested houses. The stench in summer was appalling, and funerals were as common as stealthy removals by night or "moonlight flits." Yet all around us was an acreage of real poverty, sinking in places to a level at which life was close to that of the brute. I knew boys from these areas. They were thieves at eight and rapers of girls at 14. I have known them crowd round in excitement when a man coupled with a sow.

Fighting and copulation were the outstanding pleasures of life, the only pleasures for which they paid nothing. At 12, usually, the boy or girl entered a shop or factory, and there was commonly, at the end of the first day, a ceremony of initiation, for boy or girl, churchgoer or not, that I need not describe. From that day their ears were drenched with obscene talk. On Saturday they saw their elders flock to the squalid public houses, and by evening the streets were enlivened with group-fights. The men wore thick leather belts, and they usually strung several heavy brass buckles on them. In their fights they wrapped the leather round their hands and used the brass-weighted end. Many a time I saw some drunken grey-headed woman reel out of the fight with bloody head. Our corner shop was a social observatory from which, across a waste space or sea of mud after rain, we could not but see the life of the poorer streets. The one or two police—to tens of thousands of these folk—rarely intervened, but I have seen my father, in white apron and broad-brimmed white-straw hat, push his way into a group, though he had neither the physique nor the temper of a fighter, and drag them apart.

Mechanics Institutes or night schools, at one of which I took lessons in art with great success, and pioneers of adult education like Huxley were slowly piercing the shell of this sordid medieval heritage, but, while many families like ours guarded their homes from the moral contagion and even sustained a flicker of intellectual life, the conditions were brutalizing for the majority. About that time some artist painted Queen Victoria pointing to the Bible and saying: "There is the source of England's greatness." Prints of it sold by the hundred thousand, but the irony of it was sensed by few. What was called England's greatness at that time was in largest part the world-prestige that her wealth gave her, and this rested basically upon the industry of some 12,000,000 men, women, and children; and less than half of a century

earlier this industrial army had included millions of married women and millions of children down to the age of 8. Their life, government reports still show, had been appalling. Here is what it still was in the 70's.

Before 6 in the morning the paid "knocker-up" went round the streets and beat on the windows of the bedrooms with a bunch of wire at the top of a long pole. In 10 minutes or so, for they slept in their day shirts (in which the almost universal bugs and lice were rarely disturbed) and did not wash or shave or get even a cup of tea, they roused the street with the clatter of their clogs (heavy shoes with iron-shod wooden soles, which all wore). The trickles of men and girls, their breakfasts and dinners (bread and cheese or a little bacon or meat—there was no interval for tea) carried in knotted large red or other colored and grimy handkerchiefs, blended in the Lane, our chief street, and a grim procession, looking, on the bleak winter mornings, like a march of the damned, thundered its way to the mills, a mile or two away, to make the fortunes of the great cotton-spinners and merchants and to build up England's greatness. The older folk told them how they had once worked 14 to 15 hours a day. Now Parliament had, after a fierce fight, for it was un-English to interfere with Free Enterprise, given them a 10 hour day. They reached home after those 10 strenuous hours in a fetid atmosphere, and no man then knew or cared to know how many calories to eat, about 6 or 7 in the evening.

What concern for our "spiritual realities" would you expect? After paying for what food they could on Saturdays and for indispensable clothes and shoes they drank what remained of the wage. On Monday morning the wife pawned the Sunday clothes of the family, but there was nothing to do with the money except buy more beer and food. Not one adult in four could read, and the fourth had as a rule little inclination. Few of them ever went five miles from their ant-hill. The only shows were a tawdry circus that pitched its tent on our waste ground once a year and a still more tawdry and entirely vicious 4c theater, "Simpson's Slang," that brightened the district every few months with its naphtha lamps and lewd jokes. The "respectable," like my father, took their children (walking, for cents had to be counted) occasionally to the city museum, three miles away, and once a year to the pantomime at the city theater or to the Zoological Garden. Once, by skilful strategy, my father got three cheap tickets for the railway men's annual excursion to the sea. I was 12, my brother 14, and we walked two miles at 5 in the morning and took nearly three hours to travel 40 miles in coaches with wooden seats. . . . But we saw the sea, and hardly one man or boy in several hundred of those who lived and spawned round us ever saw it. Drink, fighting (as participants or spectators), and sex were the pleasures of life. We boys had our cheap games and rambles into the country.

At 13 I took my place in the industrial army. The eight years of school were over. I was equipped—better in some respects than primary-school pupils are today, as their curriculum is over-loaded—for the work of life with a command of the three R's. One other boy and I had survived into what was called the Seventh Standard, which added a little algebra and geometry to the common fund, and we passed brilliantly. The inspectors left us in a corner, and my comrade spread Euclid on his knees below the desk and copied out the problems—and I copied what he wrote. So we set out on our business careers—Bill became a blacksmith—with full honors, and my parents had no longer to pay 12c a week—it had begun at 2c—for my education. I was to earn \$1 a week as an office-boy, and my pocket money was raised from 2c to 8c a week.

Some would ask what the specifically Catholic atmosphere of the school counted for in my education. Nothing. Most of the boys came from poor Irish homes, where the father earned from \$3 to \$5 a week, and they brought their "buggers" as well as their bugs with them. Under the pious statues and pictures that adorned the walls or on the

playground the older boys instructed the younger, when the teacher was engaged elsewhere, in the facts of life. Even today the British cities in which Catholic schools are most numerous, and the most Catholic countries of Europe—Ireland, Portugal, and pre-war Poland—have the worst criminal and sex statistics. These are published officially, but not one of the moralists, sociologists or politicians who are so eloquent about the need of religion in the school ever glances at them.

Now at 7:30 every morning, winter (which is raw in Manchester) and summer, I walked to the great city. Train-fare would be a nickel a day, and we could not afford it. My mother's eyes brightened when I proudly brought home my first dollar. Somewhere about that time she received a letter from America enclosing \$35, the man explaining that he had cheated her of that in our little shop. She fainted. Four of us were at work, and my eldest sister was a schoolma'am. But there were still three youngsters, and quarters were carefully counted. How we slept in two bedrooms, occasionally squeezing in an aunt and uncle and their two children, is obscure in my memory. But the stork had brought his last gift, the income slowly rose, our comforts gradually increased. From errand-boy in one of those huge Manchester merchant-houses I became a clerk and made good progress. The boys and men came from areas which were at least superior to West Gorton—the few girls cheerfully acknowledged that they were street-walkers at night and sex rang in my young ears as persistently as ever—but my eye kindled with ambition. Daily I saw the merchant-prince old John Rylands, chief proprietor of the enterprise and a millionaire. I would . . . And here the line snapped. The first and mildest revolution in my life occurred. I resigned and went back to the Gorton monastery to begin preparatory studies for the priesthood.