



Mike Barry, Middle East.



Haybales in sunset.

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM GRANGE

By Michael Barry

Seven years living in the Middle East has taught this Grangeman a thing or two. For one, there are no Arabs called O'Connell or Hourigan. First names (I can't really say 'Christian' names out these parts, even though there are a few) are also very different. Friends at home called Kieran, Tony, Tommy or Betty might be called Mohammad, Abdullah, Mustafa or Fatima out this neck of the woods.

And while Tommy and Betty might start a Grange day frying up a few of Peggy Ryan's finest sausages, rashers or black puddings (pre-Peggy's retirement), Mohammad and Fatima are forbidden by religious rules from ever experiencing the delicious mouth-watering taste of cooked pork. Instead, they will be sitting down to a breakfast of Arabic bread with humus (a spread made from chickpeas and olive oil), fool (ground fava beans with garlic, olive oil and lemon juice), or baba ghanoush (mashed aubergine with onions, tomatoes, olive oil and spices). Tommy might wash down the slice of Irish soda bread with a glass of milk, but Mohammad will almost certainly wash his Arabic bread down with a glass of laban, which is salty tasting liquid yoghurt drink made from sour milk. In some Middle Eastern countries, it's actually difficult to find real milk in a supermarket, or they may not stock it at all, instead only stocking every Arab's favourite – laban.

And while Johnny and Michelle Dooley might be saddling up a few horses to go for an early morning gallop around Grange Hill, or Paddy Wallace or Pat Clancy might be preparing to round up the cows for milking in days past; at same time in Qatar, Abdul and Lara Al Muhairi might be throwing a rope around the neck of a few camels to move them from one desert grazing area to another. Or getting them ready for the next big camel race-day. Which is nothing at all like the Bruff Point-To-Point!

From dawn to dusk Grange and the Middle East are as chalk and cheese. The Middle East day starts with the Muslim Call to Prayer as the Muezzin sings out the call at approximately 4.30 am over electric speakers attached to the minaret of the local mosque. The faithful, or those few faithful willing to get up that early for the first of the five daily prayers, have around twenty minutes to get to the mosque to join the Imam (Priest) and fellow worshipers. Around the same time back in Grange, some of Moira Dillon's chickens on the Old Road are starting to stir. A

few warm fresh eggs are dropped. The cock, a bit like the Muezzin back in Mecca, is giving Grange residents a wake-up call with his cock-a-doodle-doo. And Mary and Tony Dillon next door are at the same time probably wishing the cock would get a serious dose of laryngitis!

When an Arab meets a Westerner for the first time, he or she is often a little guarded. Arabs have an impression that everyone in the West has a Master's Degree and is a company owner or sophisticated businessman of some sort. But if you happen to mention that you grew up milking cows with your father back in Grange, or castrating young bulls in a Grange cattle-crush, then it really throws them. Especially the bit about the castration! They will immediately drop the guard as many of them are only a generation or two from farming families themselves, and almost all Arabs have a nomadic farming ancestry.

I met a local farmer a few years back at an animal market in Dubai, a day or two before the Muslim 'Eid' holiday, when every Muslim family must sacrifice a sheep or goat (or even a camel) to honour and remember Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son to prove his faithfulness to God. And as all Grange residents are aware from school catechism days or years of Grange Church sermons, the Angel Gabriel then mercifully intervened on God's command to save the day (and the son). Abraham then caught a sheep whose horns were caught in a nearby bush and sacrificed the animal instead. The same story is in both the Christian Bible and in the Koran of Islam.

So from the perspective of a farmer selling sheep or goats at Eid time, it is very much a seller's market. You can inflate the prices as much as you can possibly get away with as the faithful have little choice other than splash-the-cash, or face everlasting damnation and hell-fire. It's an easy choice. They fork out for the grossly over-priced under-fed goat or sheep. Gladly.

"And how much does that sheep cost?" I asked the Arab farmer. "This weekend, approximately 5,000 dirhams" (*EUR 1,000*) he replied. "And how much will it cost next week when Eid is finished?" I enquired further. "Approximately 500". He smiled. I smiled back and said that farmers in Grange where I come from and farmers the world over are all the same. We both burst out laughing at the truth of farming life. Make some money on the days you get a chance to make it. There will be far too many of the other days when no money is made at all. Feast or famine. Same for the farmer in Grange or the one in Riyadh.

As for love and marriage and finding the perfect match, then perhaps the Grange of old had far more in common with the Middle East than the Grange we know today.

Modern Grangeites have a host of venues and opportunities where boy can meet girl and eventually find his or her perfect match. The local hotspots of Clancy's, O'Meara's and Clarke's in Bruff, or venues further afield, provide the weekend opportunity for a chance or planned meeting where cupid's arrow might just hit the target.

Finding a partner in the Middle East Gulf region is somewhat different. First and foremost, the parents of boy or girl are involved from the outset in making the 'arranged marriage'. It varies a little in different regions, but the following would generally be a fair reflection of how it goes.

Firstly, having a casual boyfriend or girlfriend is generally not permitted, other than in relation to an engagement and a planned future wedding. This is partly a religious and partly a cultural thing.

When a girl or boy reaches an appropriate age, approximately their early twenties, parents and other older relations will start a scouting process. Friends will be contacted and friends of friends. A boy will eventually get sourced who has expressed a prior interest to be considered. The boy's details will be given to the parents of the girl, who will initially 'check out' the boy's family and the boy himself, through personal networks and contacts for suitability.

Assuming the boy doesn't fall at the first hurdle, he will receive some sort of informal 'nod' that he has received the green light to proceed. His relations, generally the parents, will then arrange the first meeting of boy and girl with the parents of the girl, at the house of the girl. The meeting, and in many cases depending on locality, all future meetings, will take place in the presence of the girl's family members. Boy and girl will not be left alone at any time.

The initial meeting gives the girl a first impression, and she must then decide if she will accept any further visits from the boy. If she decides to allow the relationship to proceed and it progresses as planned, then an engagement will soon be announced and a wedding date set. "And they lived happily ever after!"

The whole 'arranged marriage' scene of the Muslim Middle East will seem very strange to the people of Grange. And it can throw up some extremely interesting scenes and scenarios.

A friend of mine who lives in Saudi Arabia only met his wife twice before they got married. They honeymooned in Europe. On both occasions, Mohammad's future wife was in full abiya (black dress), hijab (black headscarf) and niqab (face veil with a slit for the eyes). So he never actually saw the face of his wife until their wedding night. In Saudi Arabia, which practices a very strict version of Islam, no social mixing of the sexes is permitted, and even wedding celebrations are divided into two; one party for the females and another for the males, in separate venues of course. So he did not even get to see his wife's face at the wedding.

Another good friend of mine is a Palestinian man named Hussam who has lived in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, for most of his adult life, where he is married with four young adult children. One of the four is a very bright twenty-three-year-old highly educated daughter. She is a modern young lady who has visited London, Rome and Vienna and would not be out of place in Reardon's on a Saturday night, or even Clancy's in Bruff. She had refused all previous suggestions of proposed suitors.



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But the son of a Saudi billionaire family somehow made contact with the dad and requested permission to visit, with a view to proposing to his daughter, in time.

Being a respectful man, the dad gave permission for the young Saudi lad to call, and he duly arrived in a red Ferrari. On introducing himself and making his pitch, which involved chapter and verse on the family multiple businesses and properties, he was

astounded to hear the dad proclaim that he would not give permission for any meeting to take place. The dad explained that the difference in family backgrounds would, in his opinion, eventually result in a poor marriage and in all probability a divorce somewhere down the line. The Saudi lad was gobsmacked by the reply he received, jumped back into the Ferrari and hightailed it back to the family palace.

In telling the story to me, Hussam explained simply that he thought the young man in question lacked humility and was wholly unsuitable for his daughter on many levels, not least intellectually. The daughter, who is also a friend of mine, confirmed that she also did not consider the Saudi lad a potential 'Mr Right', for similar reasons stated by her dad. The whole Grange/Middle East dating and marriage scene may be wholly different, but the 'father and daughter' thing may not be that much different at all.

Football (soccer). The Arabs are crazy about football with cafés full any night a game is on. Which is almost every night, when you throw in the Spanish, German and British Leagues in addition to the local. Qatar will host the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

A few months back I met the PR Manager for the Qatar Football Association at a game. I informed him about Holycross AFC back in the Grange heartland in glowing terms. *Do you have any good players*, he enquired. *Loads*, says I. *If they are really good*, he continued, *we can give them trials, and later Qatari passports to allow them play for the national team. We are trying very hard to strengthen the squad for the international tournaments in the run up to 2022. I'll get back to you*, said I as we parted company, and once out of sight I shot a text message off to Micheál Costello, who was at that very moment in the middle of a training session with the A-team back in Holycross. *What do you think Micheál* said I after a brief explanation. *No way*, Costello replied, *the Cross are in the hunt for promotion. I can't afford to lose any of the lads to the petrodollars of the Middle East.*

So it seems it will be some time yet before there are any Arabs called O'Connell or Hourigan!