Pursuing my own rainbow’s end

As the regional director and the original salesman to Bass Charrington, Alan Wightman had kept in close contact with me during my two years working with Bass. My assignment to the project was acknowledged by Alan and Sperry management to have been successful and, when the two years were up, Alan asked if I would like to return to Ireland to assist the established general manager of Remington Rand in setting up a Sperry country office. I was really pleased to have this recognition. I had enjoyed the Galway experience and there were unanswered questions as to what had really happened with Riomhaire Teoranta, University Computing Company, and the equipment we had so lovingly looked after.

Alan Wightman wanted two things: for the new Irish office to make its first-year sales target — a modest US$500,000 — and for me to train Gerry Maher and two recently recruited salesmen. That did not sound too hard. I knew that my pal Bill Leahy was back in his native Dublin and was the technical support manager for the new branch. He was looking after the systems and engineering sides of the business and I anticipated that Bill would have been able to retain the group of engineers from the Galway Riomhaire days.

For the first few weeks of the assignment, the office was still based in the old Remington Rand office on the Naas Road, in West Dublin. The building, I am sure, had been fine for the 1950s and 1960s, when Remington was a force to be reckoned with in office equipment. A new
office, in town, had been Gerry Maher’s achievement to date and was a great improvement. We moved in after I had worked with him for four or five months.

Gerry Maher, whose hand I was to hold, was as established in his habits and attitude as the Remington building was decrepit. He was a small, dark man with an aquiline nose, a receding hairline, a snarling speech habit, and suits that were too big. He drove an ancient Mercedes, aggressively, with one arm and shoulder out of the window ready to hurl abuse at other road users. Thank goodness Bill Leahy had got Gerry started on the path to acceptable behaviour before I got there. I might not have had the patience to cope with the original Gerry. He expected autocratic obedience from his staff. His habit of requiring his secretary, Margaret Parkinson, who was a lovely girl, to take shorthand notes whilst he used the ensuite in his office was his worst excess, and was only cured after the move to the newer premises. Gerry did not know how to take me. I believe he only tolerated me because I had the Riomhaire experience of selling computer services in Ireland. He accepted that selling computers would be different to selling Kardex filing systems, filing cabinets, and typewriters. Bill and I had to show him that selling was still a people business, especially as he could expect to be dealing with people that were younger and with a higher intellect than he had become used to.

Gerry’s two salesmen were Bob Sinott, a precise, slim, moustached, pipe-smoking man who was ambitiously determined to impress his Sperry colleagues, and Bernard Flanagan, a jovial young man who looked overweight and was content to let things happen, until we showed him how to make things happen and why our approach to our market had to be disciplined.

Of the Riomhaire on-site engineers, Bill Leahy, Jim Butler, and Tony Leonard were back in Dublin. Bill had purchased a home in Galway, which he sold well and moved himself and the family to Terenure, where he had been brought up. John O’Callaghan was back home in the family O’Callaghan suburbs of Cork, looking after the Sperry 90/30 system installed as a part of the Ford Motor Company worldwide network. John also supervised Martin Daley, who was resident in Shannon, with a system installed for Burlington Warehouses Limited, again part of a worldwide network. The only one of the Galway-based engineers who had moved on was ‘little’ John Caughlan, who had returned to an expatriate engineer lifestyle in the Middle East.
Tony Leonard was not a considerate person. I remembered an awful evening with him in Galway three years previously. He wanted me to experience rabbit shooting. I was really scared that evening when he started to drive across the countryside with his rifle out of the window, taking pot-shots at ravens and gulls on the telephone lines. We killed a few rabbits, but I did not enjoy that either. He had not mellowed. He was due to drive from Dublin one morning with spare parts required by Bill in Cork, and they had agreed to meet somewhere in the middle. But before he left, he read the newspaper, had his lunch, and a snooze. When I remonstrated with him, he observed it would do Bill good to be able to sit and relax while he waited for him. Tony was not all bad. He could be very funny at times. He had no sense of urgency.

Gerry Maher knew his market and had targeted two organisations: Dan Morrissey Limited of Carlow, County Carlow, and the Mitchelstown Creamery of Mitchelstown, County Cork. The sooner we had these two signed up, the sooner the branch would make its quota and the sooner Gerry would be left alone. These were two accounts in businesses I had never looked at, so it was going to be interesting. I was looking forward to it.

With more than 10 years of Sperry experience, I had got used to preparing artwork for 35 mm slides used in visual presentations. Before we visited Gerry’s prospects, I had slides made with the Morrissey and Mitchelstown logos for inclusion in a standard set of the ‘Introduction to Sperry Computer Systems’ slide show. Gerry’s obvious delight and the faces of our prospects when they saw these showed that I was starting out on the correct foot.

Dan Morrissey was a most interesting company. The founder of the dynasty had set up the company as a builders’ merchant. With five sons available, he had been able to diversify into building in his own right, and had developed a large pit on his land to provide sand and gravel in County Wicklow and surrounds. Carlow at the time was becoming a dormitory town of Dublin, but most people worked in agriculture or at the nearby sugar factory. Gerry Maher had provided office equipment to Morrissey and had watched the Morrissey boys grow up. Sperry was not the only company to have recognised a potential sale to this high-profile and growing enterprise. The family had an interest in horses and all of the
boys had private pilot licences. The boys all lived on the family land and each had a department of the company to run. Our main contact was with the youngest lad, Phil, who was assigned to run the office.

We sought pre-sales technical support to assist with the sales to Morrissey and were blessed to have Peter Stewart assigned. I knew Peter as a salesman who had been working the commercial accounts in the East Anglia region. Peter had had success as a salesman, selling to Dixons Photographic, and had a high-profile in the company as a fly fisherman and fly-tier — we knew that much from the Sperry company newsletter, *Punchline*. Peter took to the Morrissey family and they took to him. Peter was appointed bid manager for the technical aspects of our proposal. He was also the unofficial technical consultant to the Morrisseys as they evaluated the alternate vendor tenders and proposals they had received. We were also assisted by Terry Duffy, the technical director in London, an Irishman who returned home every year and was more than happy to call in to Carlow. Gerry was advised by Phil Morrissey that we would win this business, subject to a final negotiation.

We were asked to attend the final negotiation at 6.00 pm on a weekday evening. We asked Bill Huntley, the sales director from London, to attend. We wanted Bill to see how business was done in Ireland and to understand how different the rural requirements were from the requirements he was used to in the UK. Sperry was represented by Bill Huntley, Gerry Maher, Peter Stewart, and myself. We sat in the front room of the original farmhouse with the five brothers and started to drink bottled Guinness. We were made very aware that ‘Mother’ was going to be an attentive participant in the discussions, although she was in and out of the lounge room as she prepared dinner for us. We sat down to dinner at about 8.00 pm. And what a fabulous dinner it was — a roast with all the trimmings, followed by apple pie, ice cream, and custard. The (seemingly inexhaustible) crates of Guinness had followed us into the kitchen and our glasses were topped up whenever they started to look empty. Dinner took us through to about 10.30 pm, when the table was cleared, and out came coffee and a couple of bottles of whiskey. Mother came and sat with us.

When Phil Morrissey, the youngest brother and administration director, brought out his list of questions, Mother and the boys moved their chairs closer to the table, and Gerry Maher and Bill Huntley tried to push their chairs back out of the line of fire of questioning, which was OK until
the major support issues came out, literally on the table. We expected that they would want to negotiate on price. We wanted, as ever, to leave price until last. Were there any other concerns? We were not ready to be asked if Peter could be assigned full-time until Morrissey-defined milestones were achieved. Our project plan had included using Bill Leahy’s technical staff in training and indirect hand-holding. We withdrew to the lounge to discuss this. The Morrissey strategy worked. We were already in the small hours of the next day and wanted a positive resolution. Peter was keen to take the assignment but wanted to know the terms and conditions of any secondment before he would agree, as this would mean moving his family to Carlow. Peter obviously knew beforehand that the Morrisseys would ask for him and he was prepared with his requirements. Price was also negotiated. It was a long session, but we staggered out of the family kitchen with a signed contract, having typed out the new clauses on a typewriter on the kitchen table with the family still in attendance.

I have never learned if Bill Huntley had any problems with the contract back at head office, or even if the contract made money. I do know that Peter Stewart put in a huge effort to make the system a real showcase. He moved his family to Carlow, no harm came to his two lads in the local school, and Maureen (Peter’s wife) seemed happy with her lot. I was happy to have Peter in Carlow. It was a good spot to stop on the drive to Mitchelstown or Cork, and he made me a really nice fishing rod from a blank I had acquired in Cork where we were selling to Mitchelstown Creamery.

My first visit to the creamery was memorable. Gerry and I drove to Mitchelstown from Dublin to meet Padraic O’Murray, the newly appointed data processing manager. Padraic had been recruited from a London job, where he had been known as Pat or Paddy Murray. A big man with a florid complexion, he was delighted to be back home in Ireland. His Irish accent was very thick, but I could not place it. The creamery was already a computer user, having a magnetic tape-based IBM installation with which it was basically satisfied. We spent the first morning going through the standard sales presentations and getting to know one another. At noon, we asked Padraic if he wanted lunch and asked if we should go to a local pub. Padraic pointed to a pin he was wearing on his jacket lapel and explained: ‘We can go to the pub for lunch, but I shall not drink. I am a Pioneer and I do not drink. Why don’t we have lunch in the creamery canteen?’ The canteen it was. The food was magnificent. The creamery kitchen laid out a leg of ham, roast pork,
baked jacket potatoes, and a selection of cheeses. The baked potatoes were the Irish finest, with thick skins and a very floury centre, and butter was necessary to soften the spuds. The milk was very creamy. It was super. We got to meet the creamery management who were most attentive. After lunch, Padraic walked us around the creamery and attempted to define what he wanted from his new computer system.

We followed the course of the milk collection lorry through the weighbridge, the recording process, and where the decision was made as to whether milk was destined for the manufacture of butter or cheese. The operations man at the weighbridge would make that decision on the anticipated butter-fat content of the milk, knowing the milk tanker collection route that had been made. Samples of the milk and the butter-fat measure followed through the process control mechanisms as they became household milk, butter, and cheese, or were processed into dried milk. We toured the cheese and butter making sections of the creamery, which covered a vast area. We also visited the farm and were shown the pedigree animals whose progeny would improve the stock quality of the local farmers who belonged to the cooperative — we were reminded the company name was the Mitchelstown Wholesale Cooperative Society Limited. In 1977, it was the largest cooperative in Europe. The animals we inspected included bulls of various breeds, pigs, and sheep. It was a real eye-opener for a town boy such as myself. At the conclusion of the tour, Gerry again asked Padraic if he would like a drink. Padraic pointed to the pin he was wearing on his jacket lapel and again explained, ‘I am wearing the pin. I am a Pioneer and I do not drink!’ We went back to Padraic’s office. I wanted to find out what IBM was offering to meet Padraic’s wishlist. Following its usual practice, IBM had not made a definitive proposal, but was asking Padraic to make a decision between two expensive alternatives, neither of which was what he wanted, as I pointed out to him.

At 4.30 pm, Gerry again asked Padraic if he would like a drink. I thought that Padraic might get angry, but Gerry instinctively knew his man much better than I did. Padraic removed his pin and put it in the top drawer of his desk: ‘We could have a drink in the Royal Hotel in Fermoy.’ We drove in two cars to the Royal Hotel, where Padraic prevailed upon me to try Murphy’s Stout: ‘If you like Guinness, you will enjoy Murphy’s.’ I did. It was very smooth and moreish. I should have watched Gerry Maher, who was drinking coffee, with an occasional Irish coffee. It was a good
job that we had enjoyed such a big lunch. Once Padraic got a taste for the Murphy’s, he kept them coming — fast. Gerry had removed himself from what was developing into a binge.

I cannot remember what time I eventually left Padraic. I cannot even remember leaving the Royal Hotel, but learned the next day that I had hailed a Garda Síochána (police) car and prevailed upon them to take me to the hotel. Gerry had not left my bag, which had my sleeping wear and a change of clothes, out for me. I presumed it was still in the boot of his car. I had a most restless night, during which, running around the hotel corridors looking for a toilet, I had fallen through a fire door and descended the metal fire-escape, one landing at a time. On the first landing my body exploded from the excesses of the day. During the subsequent descent, I knocked chunks of skin from every sharp bit of my body. It would not have been a pretty sight, I imagine, when I was found naked and bleeding, with excrement falling through the landing lattice, at the bottom of the fire escape in the kitchen garden. The hall porter and night manager found me. They did their best to stem the flow of blood and clean me up. They dressed me in a roll of kitchen towel and put me back into bed. I am not sure what time I was up, but it was early. I found Gerry’s room, demanded my change of clothes, showered, breakfasted, and was back at the creamery by cab at 8.30 am to see Padraic. That was the start of my developing relationship with Padraic. He was adamant that no other sales representative had been able to hold their own with him in the pub as I had done. He was impressed, and so was Gerry Maher when he heard the story. But I had to swear the two of them to secrecy. From that time on, Padraic was keen to work with Sperry, but we could consider him only as a prime recommender, not the decision maker who would carry total weight with the full cooperative.

One reason I had wanted to see Padraic quickly that morning was because I had the germ of an idea that might meet his system needs. At the time, the only system that we could offer that would have not been too costly was the Sperry 90/30. The real-time Sperry 90/40 had not been announced, and we had to find a way of making the 90/30 into a pseudo real-time machine. We had a good start, as it handled terminal communications well enough. My thought had been to find a terminal that could accumulate real-time data and present it as a communications message for processing. I had seen the advantages of analogue data collection when selling process
control to Shell for Control Data Corporation. Sperry did not make or understand process control systems, but I thought we could handle data if we could collect it.

It took a few weeks to find Feedback Limited, a Home Counties supplier. I met with Feedback Limited in London and it was able to make a substantial case that it could handle the weighbridge system and present the milk weight data on a Sperry screen in a specific form. The operative would add other variables such as date, time, driver, collection route, and the initial milk-fat measurement. A similar system could be used for the weighing of cheeses travelling down a conveyor belt when the retail price tag associated with that block of cheese would be printed, and an accumulation of data collected for submission as batch data to the main production system. The prices and feedback support commitments were OK, and were presented to Mitchelstown and included in the full proposal that was accepted by the Mitchelstown board of directors. In parallel, we processed the contract acceptance paperwork through Sperry UK and got sign-off from the interested managers — with the exception of Bill Huntley, the technical director. But the deal went through.

By this time I had brought my car to Ireland and was no longer dependent upon being driven everywhere by Gerry Maher. As we proceeded towards the business with Morrissey and Mitchelstown, Gerry became more confident in allowing me to visit his prospects without him needing to be there. Gerry was now able to spend time with his salesmen and train them in his sales methods. The Sperry 90/30 systems were on quite a short lead time, and were quickly installed. Peter took control of the Morrissey account, but Mitchelstown was slower, and from my perspective allowed to drift. The first job was to convert the IBM system to operate on the 90/30, which required one skill set. The design and implementation of the new system needed a different approach and personnel, but support staff from the UK were loath to give up their initial assignments, as they were having too good a time.

I visited Mitchelstown quite frequently and stayed in the Royal Hotel at Fermoy. I was able to indulge in my fascination for fly fishing on the Blackwater River beyond Fermoy. One of the creamery computer operator’s family farmed land through which this most famous river flowed, and I was given a free run of the family’s access to the water. I made my contact with the water bailiff and thoroughly enjoyed the activity. My favourite beat was where the river ran over pebbles at the foot of a high cliff and
where the trout were accessible at most times. The Sperry project team who were assisting Mitchelstown, mostly on secondment from the UK, found a family guest house in Fermoy and had a great time in Ireland. We regularly lunched as a project team in a pub beyond Fermoy which provided excellent bar food. The smoked herring was special.

I’d try to get to Carlow and Mitchelstown once a week to offer project support. I was probably left on this assignment a month or two longer than was necessary. We had achieved the initial sales target, and shown that Ireland could be a sustainable branch in its own right. Gerry Maher had his own confidence levels, and wanted to run his own shop. We tried to reference sell off the back of Mitchelstown to the other creameries, but it was too early for this. The other creameries wanted to see results from Mitchelstown. Gerry and I had allowed the two salesmen too much licence in terms of reference selling. In this, we were embarrassed by a mistake made by Bernard Flanagan, who had taken a photocopy of the proposal I had submitted to Mitchelstown Wholesale Cooperative Society Limited and used Wite-Out to remove the typed name and the logo which appeared on every page of the original document. A typist then typed over that long 50-character space the name of the prospect creamery — ‘ABC Dairy’, for instance, a much shorter, eight-character name. This was then photocopied again, and submitted as a unique reasoned proposal. It was so obvious that the Mitchelstown paperwork had been plagiarised that we had to apologise to the cooperative and afterwards were treated with suspicion in the cooperative market.

It did not help that I had a car accident on my way to another cooperative presentation. After passing a car on a country road, I overcompensated getting back into my lane, hit the ditch and rolled the car. I can remember the roof hit the road twice. I was OK, but agonised over two broken fly fishing rods in the boot. The driver and passenger in the car following were very kind and took me into Wexford. The police took notes and we pushed the vehicle into a field — it was a write-off. I never saw the car again. The next day during the presentation, I put my hand into my jacket pocket and removed chippings from broken windshield and windows from the car. I can still hear the sound of the tinkle of the glass as I dropped it into an ash tray. The amazing thing was that the jacket had been in a suitcase in the boot of the car.
Not having a car restricted my freedom in Ireland, and head office requested that I return to the UK to project manage the Sperry presence at the Provident Management Services Limited installation in Halifax, Yorkshire.

Before I left Ireland after this second assignment, Audrey came across the North Sea and I enjoyed showing her Carlow, Mitchelstown, Fermoy, and Cork, before we headed to Galway for a short break. We got a great welcome from the Mitchelstown Hotel where I had disgraced myself some six months previously. Hotel staff had fun reminding me and it was not too embarrassing after Audrey got over the shock of the initial announcement shouted from the reception desk to the hall porters: ‘It’s him. He’s back!’ I still look forward to getting back to Ireland, principally to the West coast. It is a great place and I must have been to Galway 30 times for holidays since then.