

# MY LIFE AND MUSIC

by Andrew (Sonny) Riordan



*Andrew (Sonny) Riordan, a Sliabh Luachra musician in the traditional mould and a pupil of the legendary Padraig O'Keefe.*

I was born in February 1918. My Father's name was Dan Riordan and my Mother's name was Hannah Moynihan from Rathbeg, Rathmore. There were 9 children in the family - 5 boys - Jerh, Denis, Dan, Pat and I, Andrew the youngest. four girls were Nora, Nellie, Julia and Hannah. Most of our family emigrated to

America. There was no mention of industry in our area at that time. We had a small farm in the heart of Sliabh Luachra, in the townland of Ballinahulla. The land was of poor quality and money was very scarce. I started school at Tureencahill at a young age and met many teachers in my time there. The teacher I liked best was Danny

Keefe, R.I.P. from Novohal, near Knocknagree. He died a young man. He was a brilliant teacher and his method of teaching was easy to understand. On two occasions our school won awards -, free books for all the pupils and free books for the very poor. My education finished for me early in life at 13 years. as there was no second level schools in the area we finished at primary level - some to work at home and others to work for farmers.

At that time, I got interested in music and when my sister Julia won a fiddle at a travelling show I was delighted. This travelling show company was from Scotland. They would travel through the country, going from village to village, staying in each area for a couple of weeks. The man in charge of the show was Geordie Taylor. He was a mighty performer himself and so were his crew. They had some great plays. They had no admission charge but there were several raffles held during the performance. Tickets were one penny each and they had some lovely prizes. At the back of the stage behind the curtain, these were displayed - Sets of ware, clocks of all shapes and sizes, and fiddles. That was how Julia got the fiddle with her lucky ticket. The boss of the show

offered her £5 instead of the fiddle, but she held onto the fiddle. I often wonder about her choice as £5 at that time would have put her in the upper money bracket.

Then we got in touch with Pdraig O’Keeffe, R.I.P., and asked him to come to teach me music. He explained to me the make of the fiddle. He showed me how to hold the fiddle and bow properly and wrote two easy tunes for me. I was on my way to become a musician. Pdraig would come to our house on a Monday, mainly because he wanted the half-crown after the weekend. He would write out 5 tunes for me there and then for the 2/6. An amazing thing about him was that he would converse away and write the tunes at the same time. He had a special style of writing music. He “bowed” the music. The following piece is an example of this. It is in Pdraigs own handwriting, written in 1927.

In recent years I had visits from a few musicians enquiring about this special style.

Learning to play the fiddle was tough going for a while. There was no fiddle-player in the area and when the fiddle went out of tune, I was not able to tune it and could not play ‘till Pdraig called again. I got over that problem after some time but there was another problem that I had not bargained for and that was work.

When my older brothers

emigrated, the younger ones had to take their place. It was tough going because there was hard work on farms then - acres of potatoes, oats, cabbage, turnips and mangolds. The land had to produce the food for the people and the animals. There was no Rhyno lorry at that time. After spending a few years working at home I was sent off working for farmers. I must say they hadnt much interest in music - you were hired to work. My next

shift was working in Barna Bog.

Bord-na-Mona took over the bog in the late thirties and development started in 1941.

The bog had to be drained and levelled and it took five years to get the ground suitable for machinery. I started work in Barna in 1943 and worked there for 42 years. Management had no time for music. Like the farmers work was their motto. Most of the work in Barna was



Music notes impeccably written out for a pupil by Pdraig O’Keeffe.





*Sonny, (back to camera), taking part in a music session with other well-known musicians from the area.*

on a piece- rate basis - you were paid according to what you did, and not a penny more.

The cutting season started in March and lasted until July. The machine that cut the turf was called the bagger. Its weight was 75 tons - pretty heavy where the ground was soft. We often had to dig it out when it sank. You worked on the bagger on a shift basis around the clock , day and night except Sundays. We never worked on Sundays. Very few people believed that the Bagger worked during the night. I can assure them that it did, and it was not something I looked forward to trying to make my way to and from the Bagger at midnight. The harvesting started when the turf was fit to foot. The turf rows were counted into plots or floors as they were called in Barna. the floors consisted of so

many rows counted by the ganger, with a timber peg driven at the end of each floor bearing a number starting with one and continuing on. The number on the pegs helped to keep an account of the floors. The flooring was done on a piece-rate basis also - so much for each floor and it was up to you after that. When the turf was dry it was collected into ricks by a machine called a collector. Then clamped and in later years covered by polythene until it was sold at the end of the year. The turf was loaded into wagons and taken to the loading yard which was erected at one end of the bog. There also were the work-shop, store, office and weighbridge where the lorries were weighed before and after being loaded. The wagons were drawn by a loco, on a railway

line - the same principal as C.I.E but on a much smaller scale. It was some miracle to see the loco and ten wagons of turf travelling over bog ten to twelve feet high. Bord na Móna was the only industry in my area in those days and though the going was often rough, I am glad to have been a part of it.

Many years before Bord na Móna got involved in Barna Bog, an incident took place which is worth mentioning. A travelling couple were in the area. Tinkers they were called, though Pdraig Keeffe called their equals tourists. They visited a house near the bog where a man, his wife and daughter lived. The travelling woman wanted to tell the young girl's fortune. When the parents refused this permission as they

thought her incapable of doing this, she went out to the door and looked out in the direction of the bog. She foretold there would be lots of men working out there, big sheds built and that a train would be travelling across the bog. The man of the house said "That's enough" and the Travellers left. No one in the area would dream of believing her story. How right she was in time!

Another event took place in my young days worth mentioning. It was the homecoming of my sister Nora, R.I.P., from America in 1927. One of the improvements that had to take place for her was to put in a

cement floor in the kitchen - a big undertaking then. The Doyle brothers or John A. Wood, had not arrived on the scene and the materials, both sand and gravel, had to be found in the local river. When all was ready the floor was put in place and everyone felt great. But there was a problem, the yank came home two days later and the floor was not properly set. To add further to the problem, she brought a gramophone with a good supply of song and dance records with her. The house filled up with all the neighbours, in to see the yank and when they heard the music they naturally wanted to dance. My father R.I.P. said "No

dance, the floor would be destroyed". But after a long discussion, it was agreed that if they brought in their Sunday shoes or boots the following night they could try out one set. If there were no ill-effects, they could dance every night. This they did 'till the following April. The Yank returned to the States and took another sister with her - and that brought our fun to an end. To return to my music, I did not play much in my younger days. Music was not very highly rated at the time. There was very little respect for Padraig Keefe, or any musician. Also it was customary that if somebody died or if a friend was sick, I could



*Sonny playing to his heart's content with the late Mike Cronin, Reaboy, a friend and neighbour, on concert flute.*





not play for months. It was very discouraging and I gave up playing for a time. What a contrast today. We have music played at gravesides.

My wife comes from Tureencahill where we now live. Her name is Hannah Mary, better known as Ciss. Her father - Mike Tom Fleming - was a well respected man in the locality. He was a member of the Republican Courts in other days. We were married in Rathmore church on the 30th of June 1951. We have three children; Joan, Mary and Patrick. Joan and Mary are lucky to have jobs in their own country. Patrick emigrated to Boston. Apart from my wife's pet name being Ciss, my pet name is Sonny. I am much better known as Sonny than by my real name, Andrew. These pet names can often cause funny problems. Like most people, we were called upon to

bear our crosses, but we thank God for the grace to do so. We built our own house 44 years ago and have been living here since.

Music has a special place in my heart. I enjoy music sessions and have made many friends through music for which I am most grateful. I played at many parties and Biddy dances with Danny Piggot, R.I.P. on the mouth organ. Diarmuid Murphy, R.I.P, from Knocknageeha was a lovely fiddle player in the 1960's. We often had a good evening of music here by the fireside after Diarmuid finished his job in the local Waterworks. For years, I played a lot with Mick Cronin R.I.P of Reaboy. Mick played the concert flute. We had many a great session together in Tom Fleming's Bar in Scartaglen. Mick died at a young age. I was lost then as I had no car. My music sessions

stopped, except for the times my nephew, John Walsh, took me to Scully's in Newmarket. In recent years, Patsy O'Connor, from Glountane calls to me, mostly on Tuesday nights. John Collins of Knocknageeha joins us also. Both play the box.

I never took part in competitions nor was I ever was paid for my music. I just fell in with other musicians when the opportunity arose, mostly in pubs and in local Fleadh Cheoils. I took part with my local Tureencahill Tops of the Parish Group down through the years.

I hope the Lord will give me the health to continue my music for many years to come. It is my wish that music will be kept in the traditional style, as I learned it.

My thanks to Cumann Luachra for featuring me in their magazine - and I wish them many years of success in their wonderful work.



*Sonny Riordan*

