

My Life and Music

BY PADDY CRONIN

Paddy Cronin, a native of Reaboy, Gneeveguilla, is regarded as one of Sliabh Luachra's most accomplished fiddle players. From a musical family, he was a pupil of the late Padraig (Patrick) O'Keeffe and performed with some of the most notable virtuosos, including O'Keeffe and Denis Murphy, before emigrating to the USA in 1949. In the course of 40 years in America, mainly in Boston, he played with traditional musicians from many other parts of Ireland, and now has a style which is very much his own. He has made several recordings for O'Byrne de Witt and is extremely well-known in traditional Irish music circles across America as was his late brother, Johnny. Having mastered the techniques of the top players, Paddy has been bracketed with acknowledged maestros like Morrison, Coleman and Killoran and has few equals as a reel player. He also plays concert flute. Nowadays, Paddy has a home in Killarney.

Here, he tells his story:

I was only nine or ten years of age when my father, who was known to everybody as Mick Denny, presented me with my first fiddle. Now, he didn't play himself - even though he had a great love of music - but my mother Hannie (nee Nagle), who hailed from Gortdarrig, underneath the two Paps, was very musical. She was a concertina player but I never remember seeing her with the instrument: there were nine children in the family and I suppose she had enough to do to look after us, for we were no

angels. She was in America for three or four years before she married my father.

My mother used to talk a lot about taking up the concertina again but she never got round to doing it. She was a grand singer and visitors to the house were always calling on her to sing. She had many of Joe Dineen's songs and "Headford Ambush" is one that comes to mind. She was as fine a singer in the traditional style as I ever heard. She had a lovely, sweet voice and my sisters, Kathy and Han, are also good singers.

I had an aunt living in Mausroure, Hannah (Mrs. Kelleher), and she had a fiddle which she hardly used at all. She was my father's sister and he used to visit there a lot. Con McCarthy, Of Leam, was a friend of ours and I often heard him playing the fiddle. I used to say to myself "Wouldn't it be nice to have my own fiddle?" From a very early age, I had a natural liking for music which always came easy to my ears.

One day, Con said to my father that he should get a fiddle for the 'young lad' who was mad for music. So before long, he got the fiddle from my Aunt Hannah and landed home with it under his arm one night. My father said that the next thing would be to get somebody to teach me, so he was told by Con to send for Patrick O'Keeffe, a well-known fiddle player and music teacher from Glountane.



Leading Sliabh Luachra musician Paddy Cronin in typical pose.

Anyway, Patrick agreed to take me on and I remember how he called to Tureencahill National School for me on the first day. Danny O'Keeffe and Jer Paul Cronin were the teachers there at the time and they stuck their heads out the window talking to Patrick, who had been a teacher himself.

Patrick went on ahead of me to Reaboy and when I landed home, he was playing "The Swallow's Tail", but the first tune I got from him was a simple polka "The Munster Bank". Patrick wrote out the music in figures and I'd no bother in picking up the system. I found the music easy to learn and one day he wrote out thirteen tunes for me, half filling a copybook. He'd go to Scartaglen and talk "about this guy going through the tunes like anything."

When I was growing up in the 1930s and '40s, house dances were all the go - biddy

dances, snap apple nights, thresher dances and the like. I remember being at 17 house dances one winter. There'd be a half tierce of porter, big crowds, a great crack, music and dancing all night. I played all the time with Patrick, Denis Murphy and Johnny O'Leary.

Patrick and I were playing in a house near Cordal one night and the crowd was so big on the floor that there was no room for us to sit down. So what did the woman of the house do, only point to the kitchen table, saying "let ye go up there, lads". We took our basins of porter, put our chairs up on the table and as we were stepping up, Patrick, who was fierce witty, declared "Christ, Paddy, we'll go up in the gallery". I still laugh at that remark to this day.

Dance-halls were there too, of course, and I remember Thady Willies in Gneeveguilla, and Peter Murphy's in

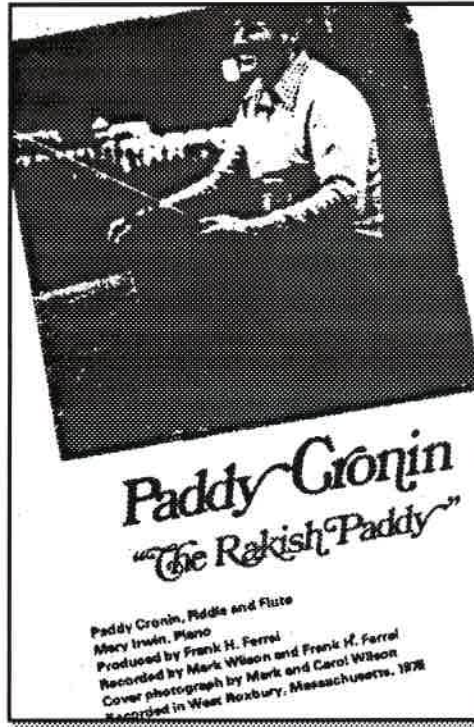
Lacca. Sometimes, Denis Murphy would go up on to the stage to play a tune during dances in Lacca, and I used to be delighted with that. Peter had a lorry bringing crowds to dances. The dance-halls, however, were more inclined to go for modern bands and the main credit for preserving traditional music in those days must go to the house dances. You couldn't depend on dance-halls to do it.

Patrick O'Keeffe used to travel to Lacca Hall in the cab of Peter's lorry. But one night when his seat in front was taken by somebody, he jumped into the back of the lorry with the rest of the crowd. As the lorry rounded the sharp bends at Tureengarriffe, between Scartaglen and Ballydesmond, the crowd in the back was being thrown from side to side and Patrick, who had a few pints taken, was heard to shout "Tell the driver to slow down or I'll spill!" He looked at the funny side of everything and no matter where he'd find himself, he'd come up with a good one.

The fiddle was by far the most popular instrument that time and nowadays, I believe, not enough people are playing it. They're more inclined to go for the accordion now, but you can do things with a fiddle that you could never do with an accordion. I think the accordion is fine for pubs because it is loud, is perfect for amplification and can be heard in noisy crowds. But, with amplification, the music isn't that good. Another thing is that you can't force a fiddle in order to be heard.

I maintain that a house is the best place

to play the fiddle, which is music for the kitchen and the fireside. Pubs are second best. There's nothing nicer than sitting down with a crowd inside a house. I love that. Even if I'm on my own, I love to sit down and play for myself.



In the 1940s, Ireland was on its knees and like thousands of others, I realised that, sooner or later, I'd have to emigrate. I was working at home on the farm with my father and I also worked for Bord na Mona in Barna Bog. But it was all bullwork, a sort of slavery. You'd kill yourself for a five pound note. I saved the hay and cut turf and opened drains in Barna but there's no heavy work like that in Ireland today. Machines are there to do it all. Before

I left, horses were all the go - every town you'd go to you'd see nothing but horses with bags under their heads.

Times were bad and we hadn't much money but music kept our spirits up. At home, my father would ask me to "play a couple" to while the nights away while my brother, John, who was eight years younger than me, was also picking up music, mainly from watching me play. John was an excellent musician and his first tune was "Jackson's Morning Brush", one I got from Patrick O'Keeffe.

Con McCarthy was a man I always loved to visit. Whenever I'd call, he'd take down his fiddle straight away. He used to play the "Rose on the Heather" on the fiddle and "Irish Mary" on the tin whistle. Another man who helped me was Thady Cronin, of Reaboy, who taught me to play the tin whistle.



Frank Neylon, George Stanley, P. Cronin and Des Regan, Boston early '50s.

Seamus Ennis visited Sliabh Luachra collecting music and he recorded two reels from me which were later played on Radio Eireann. That was my first broadcast and it was around 1948. The recording was made in a farmer's house near Ballyvourney. Later, Ciaran MacMathuna, did a programme with me in America.

The standard of music was exceptionally high when I was growing up. Patrick and Denis Murphy were the best but Din Tarrant, Tom Billy Murphy and Con McCarthy were also very good. I only barely remember Julia Clifford from my youth but she is still playing very well.

By the time I left for America in the early summer of 1949, I had a barrel of tunes, a lot of which I've long forgotten but it is amazing how they can come back to me again if I hear them being played, at a Fleadh Cheoil, for instance. And I learnt a great deal of new tunes from the hundreds of musicians I was to meet in the States.

I left for the States on June 2nd, 1949,

with my cousin, Den Cronin, of Scrahanveal, and Jack Andrew Sheehan, a neighbour. Timmy Hickey, from Gneeveguilla, drove us to Rathmore Railway Station in his hackney car and we travelled by train to Cobh.

An incident which happened that day remains in my mind. On the day before I left, I was cutting rushes with a scythe for Denny Gleeson at Mausroure. Denny was a returned Yank and a very good singer, having spent many years in the Bush in Oregon, and as we passed his house in the hackney car, he shouted at us "For Christ's sake, don't ye go at all". And there we were, all heading off with high hopes. I often laugh at that since.

In Cobh, we boarded the "Marine Flusher", which had been a troop ship during World War Two, and arrived in New York eight days later. The week on board ship was one of the most enjoyable I ever had and when we disembarked in New York, we were met by Jack's sister, Bridie, who was very nice to us. I more or less headed straight for Boston where

I was met at the train station by my Aunt Peg (Cronin) and her husband, Pat Flaherty.

I spent a couple of years in Boston, working at a variety of jobs. When I got there first, the John Hancock building was the tallest in the city. You'd hardly see it now, with so many other big buildings gone up around the place.

Naturally enough, I brought my fiddle with me and I had scarcely set foot on American soil when I was playing music. I played with Joe Derrane, a leading accordion player, and with Connie Foley, the singer from Tralee. Many people will remember one of Connie's favourites "The Wild Colonial Boy". I made a few 78 records on the de Witt label and also made a few with Frank Neylon, a Clare flute player, which were very popular.

I was in Boston for about two years when a bunch of Hibernians (Ancient Order of Hibernians) arrived from Chicago, 1,200 miles away. Amongst them was Paddy Greaney, a native of Ballyheigue, and they wanted me to come back to Chicago with them. They fixed me up with a job in charge of boilers at the Evangelical Hospital. I was working mainly at night and after three years, decided to return to Boston, where I've remained ever since.

My wife, Connie, is a native of Boston and we both had family connections there so we thought it best to go back. Connie doesn't play music but she has a great ear for it and is a very good singer. Her father, Martin Curran, came from Caherciveen, while her mother Margaret (nee Kelleher), was from Rathbeg, Rathmore. Connie has been a wonderful support to me and I couldn't function without her.

In America, an Irish musician can be kept going round the clock and I played

an awful lot in houses, pubs, dance-halls, the lot. They know me all over Boston, just like a bad ha'penny and why wouldn't they after 38 years? However, contrary to what many people think, I made no money out of music. The desire to make money ruins music. I've always stuck with the old style music and am not going to change now.

Many of the people I played with are now dead - flute players like Frankie Neylon, Clare; Gene Preston, Sligo; Pat Martin, Galway; Tom Kelly, Galway; Jim Begley, Sligo and Joe Wynne, U.S.A. And how could one forget other deceased musicians like Johnny Brosnan, Scartaglen; Billy and John Caples, U.S.A. It is grand to think that some still survive - the likes of Mike McDonagh, Seamus Connolly and Brendan Tonra, and Larry Reynolds who has a popular Irish music radio programme in Boston. I also played with the Johnny Powell Orchestra and a host of Canadian musicians who were very great players.

Our house in Boston, which we still have, was often visited by musicians and people like Paddy O'Brien, Joe Cooley, Kevin Keegan and Joe Burke all stayed with us. The Irish generation before me in Boston carried on the house tradition ('kitchen rackets') but this had virtually faded out before my time.

My normal work in Boston involved painting and decorating. I worked hard at that, six or seven days a week, but as the years crept up on me, I got tired. Once you hit 60 years of age, you've got to slow down. Drink is the ruination of many a great musician.

We now have a house in Killarney which I'm enjoying very much and I also play in the odd session here. I'm also helping a few young musicians which is most satisfying. When I was a youngster, I

learned a great deal from playing with top class performers like Patrick O'Keefe and Denis Murphy. It is different with young players today who don't have such people to play with. If a musician wants to improve and to learn, he or she must play with the best.

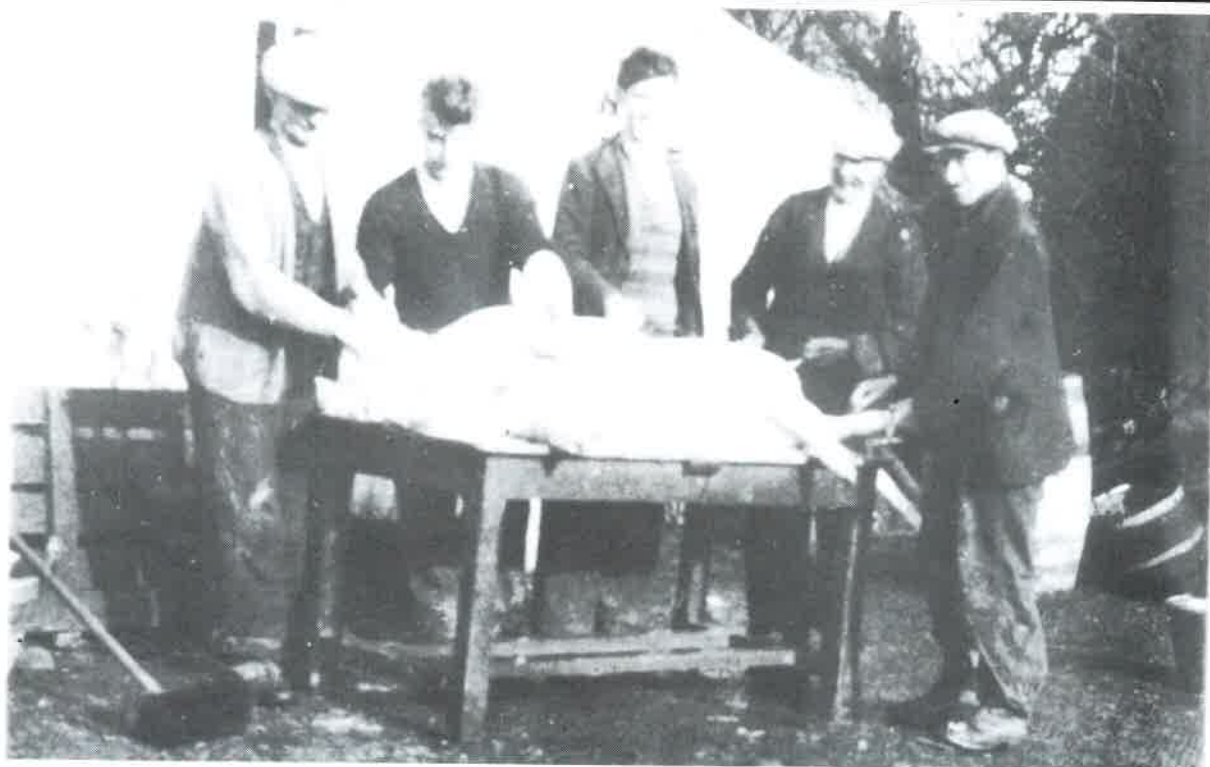
During my 40 years in the States, I made 19 trips home and have hardly ever missed an All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil since I attended my first in Boyle in 1960. The Fleadh is a marvellous reunion and, along with the Willie Clancy Week in Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare, is the premier event in Irish music. I love meeting the same players every year, like my friend, Tom Dunne, from Wexford.

Connie and I have six children - Michael, Patrick, Eileen, Vincent, Margo and Daniel. Vincent is a fine flute player while his wife Suzanne plays banjo and

guitar. Talking about the flute, it is a wonder how more people here, especially in Sliabh Luachra, aren't playing it! My late brother, Mick, used to play the flute but it was in America he learnt to play and he was over 30 years of age before he took it up. He did very well at it considering that he had a late start.

But, I'd be most concerned about fiddle playing. Now, there's too much emphasis on the accordion but you can't beat the fiddle for our kind of music.

I'm now 65 years of age but I feel great and am playing better than ever. I'm also much more relaxed and I like to play more. My fingers are still quite supple. Since I gave up work as much, my music has been given a new lease of life. I don't know whether I am good or bad, but everybody seems to think that I am good at it. Anyway, I'll keep on playing until I drop.



A pig-killing scene from the Kiskeam area in the late 1930s. In those days most farmers cured their own bacon, which was part of the staple diet at the time. In picture are (from left): Jim Dennehy, Connie Noonan, Den Dennehy, Mike Hallisey and Con Lane. (Picture courtesy of Den Dennehy).