

Unearthing the Genius of Patrick O’Keeffe



It could never be said of Patrick O’Keeffe that he was a child of convention or even a conventional child. He was, it seems, quite adept at tuning a fiddle at the age of four or five. Conventional ? No! Genius? - time would tell. It has taken a long time for people to wake up to an appreciation of the genius that was Patrick O’Keeffe. His legacy has been brought home to us here in this valley by the fortunate intervention of a series of ‘strangers’.

Only for the inquisitive, pioneering nature of these people you wouldn’t be reading this today. Thankfully, one of their ilk is among us this weekend. Peter Browne followed in the footsteps of Seamus Ennis and Ciaran MacMathúna in the quest to unearth more information on the Glounthane born fiddle master.

Patrick’s lack of regard for convention would manifest itself too in later life. He threw up what some people would regard as a sound and reliable job after only five or six years as a teacher at Glounthane

National School - where he succeeded his father as principal. Thereafter he spent four decades of his life as a wandering music teacher. In the recently broadcast Sé Mo Laoch programme, on Paddy Cronin, the Gneeveguilla born pupil of O’Keeffe’s gave us another gem of an insight into the master’s unconventionality:

“Patrick Keeffe came over to the window of the school one day and raised it up and said to the teacher: “let out young Cronin there I’m teaching him back at the house.”

No more than a handful of people recognised the traits of his genius when he walked the roads hereabouts in the course of his life as a free spirit and musician - and the few who did were ‘special’ themselves. People like Willie Clancy, the renowned piper from Milltown Malbay, sought out O’Keeffe and they had a couple of great days playing in Scartaglin. Did they ever think that they would have festivals held in their honour in their respective towns? - and we’re forever reminded that only a handful of public houses here appreciated the gentle natured Patrick as a customer.

In Castleisland you could count the number of pubs on the fingers of one hand and not touch the thumb. Tom McCarthy’s was a favourite of his and in fact it was the last pub in which he drank before being admitted to St. Catherine’s Hospital in Tralee - where he died on February 22 - 1963 at the age of 75. Julia Fitzgerald’s was another of his houses - in any case it was a pub in which all Glounthane people congregated when in town.

To stick with the vernacular culture of understatement: Patrick O’Keeffe must have been a handy fiddler. Why else would the likes of piper Seamus Ennis, in his capacity as collector of music and folklore, seek out his company in the early 1950s. There were others: American collector, Diane Hamilton visited Castleisland in 1955 in the company of Liam Clancy. It was during this raid that Clancy took the best known photograph of Patrick in Scartaglin.

A famous compilation resulted from the collaboration between the two great musicians. Ennis was working for the BBC at the time and he succeeded in getting Patrick, along with Denis Murphy, and Julia Clifford involved in a recording session in Charlie Horan’s pub on September 9 in 1952.

At the time, and on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a young Republican senator was fighting for his political life. Richard Milhous Nixon was trying to clear his name after being accused of misappropriating an \$18,000 election fund; he rose to that challenge and won - but fell again later on - as history has it.

Back on this side: The recordings made by Seamus Ennis at Charlie Horan’s that day went into the BBC Sound Archives and emerged in 1977 as the Kerry Fiddles - Music from Sliabh Luachra Vol.1 released under the Topic label.

To bring the topic around to today and the reason why we’re gathered here, another noted piper, Peter Browne arrived in Castleisland late in 1992 and began researching the life and times of O’Keeffe for RTE Radio 1. His findings led to the broadcast in November 1994 of a four-part documentary which looked at every aspect of the life of the wandering, musical genius.

At the conclusion of his work in the Sliabh Luachra area in early 1993 Peter Browne’s parting gift was to hint that Castleisland should remember the great man somehow. He suggested it could be done by means of a festival to mark the 30th anniversary of his death before the year was out. That happened and the event is going strong to this day. Now, to close the loop in earnest, that idea for the festival was first mooted in a pub run at the time by Mary Jones - a Glounthane native. The pub? - Charlie Horan’s - where, you could say, it all began on September 9-1952. Mary Jones took up the challenge and became the first festival president in 1993 - and here we are today.

John Reidy of the Patrick O’Keeffe Festival