

MY LIFE AND MUSIC

by
Paudie Gleeson

It was a warm first day of June that I took my first breath. Nurse Minnie Brosnan, R.I.P., was the midwife who assisted my mother at my birth. Nurse Brosnan was a sister of Timmy Hickey, the blacksmith in Gneeveguilla. She delivered a lot of babies around Sliabh Luachra in her time and when she would meet them in later life would say: 'I was the first person to slap your bottom!' A noted character.

My mother, Katie O'Leary, was from the homestead here at Mountrudger. My father, David Gleeson, came from Crohane, Clonkeen. He was a cattle dealer and drover in his younger days. They had nine children and reared them in hard times. They were: Denio, R.I.P., Mossie, R.I.P., Eileen 'Eily May' Holland, Margaret 'Greta', Jerry, John Joe, R.I.P., Davie, James, R.I.P., and myself. John Joe and James died young.

When I was six weeks old a fire destroyed our home. My mother got up to my cries in the middle of the night and found the kitchen full of flames. Everyone escaped out the window. My first year of life was spent in Den & Hannie Spillane's home. They were neighbours of ours. My godparents were Katie Spilland and Aeneas 'Jackie' O'Leary. Some of the family stayed in Mahoney's next door to us. The house that replaced the old home is the two-storey house we are living in at present.

I started school in Gneeveguilla at four years old. I couldn't wait to go. I saw everyone else going and thought it was a great idea. Mr. Sharpe was my teacher at the beginning. John O'Mahony replaced Mr. Sharpe. Charles O'Leary was principal teacher

when I started and, by the time I left, John O'Mahony was principal. In those days we were barefoot from St. Patrick's Day until well into autumn. We used to travel the four miles back and forth to school barefoot. When we got shoes for the winter, they were pure torture. In those times the weather, from what I remember, was much drier and warmer in summer and the winter was drier and very frosty. We used to love to skate on the ice on the way to school. We were up to all the tricks and roguery of any garsún of those times.

Christmas time was a time for celebrations. The jar of porter and wine (for the women), Christmas cake and sweets were all brought in. We had great nights. My mother cooked a goose for Christmas dinner - I can smell the aroma of Christmas dinner cooking on our arrival home from Mass. On St. Stephen's night, I went out on the wren. I really enjoyed going around to houses with my branch of a tree and my song, 'The wren, the wren, the king of all birds, St. Stephen's day he was caught in the furze.' Paddy Finnegan, R.I.P., of Leame, my best friend, joined me on the wren for the couple of later years, but to my dismay my profits were halved.

I finished school at 14, which was the normal occurrence in those days. I worked in Barna bog until I was 16. I worked around on tractors for my brother Denio.

I'll never forget meeting Johnny 'Mick Dinny' Cronin of Reaboy, a renowned fiddle player. I met him when I was about 16 years old. We met each other at the Quarry Cross. I had heard of Johnny, but never met him. He said to me, 'Are you Paudie Gleeson?' I said I was. I said, 'Are you Johnny Cronin?' He said he was. I said, 'I heard about you.' He said, 'We'll wrestle' and off we went. After we finished we dusted ourselves off and that was the beginning of my friendship with Johnny Cronin.



At the time, the rambling house was at Danny Dave Dan's, of the Quarry Cross. There were sets danced there every night in the winter. There was many a good set danced at Danny's on our way home from Sunday Mass. We'd throw the bike down and off into the house for a set. Johnny Cronin was an advanced player at that time. Mick, Johnny's brother, and Danny Dave Dan on tin whistles were the musicians. Johnny kept after me to get a fiddle. Johnny knew where a fiddle was for sale in Mickey Murphy's of Direen. So off we went walking through bog and water and purchased a fiddle for me for £3-10-0 (£3.50).

On the way home, at Tureenamult bog, we sat on a bog reek of turf and Johnny started playing for over an hour until it got dark. The fiddle could be heard in Leamyglissane. No wonder a tune was christened, 'The Lark in the Clear Air'. Johnny often came up to our house to play that fiddle. He used to sit my mother down to listen to him. She had a great interest in music. In her young days she was a concertina player. She played with Mick Finnegan of Leame, up at the pattern dances in Knockrour, Scartaglen. Her concertina was most likely burned in the fire and that was the end of her playing. She influenced me to play. My father was a good singer and step dancer. Johnny said to me 'The best thing you could do is to go up and get started with lessons from Pdraig O'Keeffe'. He'd get you off on the right foot. The two of us made our way up to Pdraig's in Glountane. We met him at his sister's place. It was my first meeting with Pdraig.

Pdraig O'Keeffe was a fine cut of a man. He was about 6ft. and had bushy hair combed back. He was a very soft-spoken man with a special knack of making you comfortable. He picked up the fiddle I had bought from Micky and knew it right away. He said, 'How did Mickey think of selling her?' Johnny said, 'He had two.' 'Well', said Pdraig 'this one is a beauty, so sweet and purring.' He tuned it to his liking and started showing me all about the fiddle - how to hold it properly and to use the bow in the right direction. He said, 'When you develop the art of bowing, it's the same as stirring sugar in a cup of tea', and smiled when I said, 'My cup will take a lot of sugar.' He laughed at that. He said, 'You'll do okay, you have the wit. Now, give me that copybook I see sticking out of your inside pocket.' I thought he could see through me. He laid the copy on the

table, turning the cover inward and, with a short pencil that he pulled from his waistcoat pocket, drew five lines. 'Now', he said, 'what could you make of that?' I looked and said, 'Five lines, if they are fiddle strings there would only be four.' He said that it takes five ditches to make four roads. Explaining his easy method, between the lines were the strings. He wrote two easy tunes, 'The Rising of the Moon' and a polka, 'The Munster Banks'. 'Now', he said 'you are on your way, plenty of practice.'

As we came on the road outside his house, he said if we were not in a hurry would we convey him to Scartaglen. That suited very well. Johnny Cronin taking the fiddle and I on the back of the bike, Pdraig the driver. We laughed all the way to Scartaglen. In Jack Lyons pub, he played a lot of tunes giving the fiddle to Johnny and Neily Flynn to play. After a couple of hours, about 5 p.m., he said to us, 'It'll be dark soon, be on your way.' I made frequent visits to Pdraig on Sundays. What great evenings they were! He could bring tears to your eyes when playing an air.

February 1st was another day that comes to mind. It was the day a group of us went out on the 'biddy'. It was the feast day of St. Bridget. A gang of us, Vin Cronin and his sisters from Tureenamult, Danny Dave Dan Cronin and his sisters, my brother, Davie, Johnnie Cronin and Michael D, Kelliher and his sister from Mausrour. We travelled the countryside on our bikes, going in and out to houses, dancing sets and playing music. A long, hard day but we really enjoyed it. The purpose was to collect a few bob to run a dance. The dance was held in John Fleming's, Gneeveguilla village. He was good enough to give us the house for the night. Beverages were bought and the girls brought some food. Johnny O'Leary and Paddy Moynihan, father of fiddle player, Connie Moynihan, supplied the music for us, while we danced and played until the break of day. We only stopped for someone to sing a song.

In the mid-1950's, my friend, Johnny Cronin, left for America. Irish music was at a low ebb. Modern dance bands came into the dance halls. Many musicians emigrated. I just drifted from the fiddle playing.

I left for New York in the end of 1959 with my two brothers, Jerry and Davie. For the years I was there

we had memorable times with Jimmy O'Brien, now pub-owner in Killarney, Jerry Finnegan, R.I.P., Aeneas O'Leary, R.I.P., of Leame and Denis Kelliher of Gneeveguilla village. I was back and forth between Ireland and New York until I went to Chicago in 1966.

I worked as a plumber for the Chicago Housing Authority. I met my wife, Agnes Duffy, in Chicago. Her father, Tom Duffy, R.I.P., and mother Agnes Browne, were both Chicago-born. They were both fiddle players and played Irish traditional music around the southside of Chicago when they were teenagers. Agnes' grandfather, Mike Duffy, born in Monaghan, was a well known fiddler on the southside of Chicago until his death in 1968. Tom presented me with his father's fiddle on one of his visits to Ireland. Mike Duffy had found it in an alley in Chicago, all smashed. He put it back together and played it for years. It was made in the late 1700's. It turned out to be a very sweet fiddle. I had it done up again by Jim O'Halloran from Carrigaline, Cork.

Agnes and I were married on Sept. 12th, 1970. After Mass and before the reception, the bridal party had lunch and a few drinks at the family home. It turned into a sing-song, and her father played a few tunes. My groomsman, Thade O'Leary and my bestman, Jerry Finnegan R.I.P., both of Leame, persuaded me to play a tune. Reluctantly, I obliged. It was the first time I played a fiddle for many years. We spent our honeymoon in Gneeveguilla. We had brought a new Magnavox recorder and taped Johnny O'Leary and Denis Murphy. We met Jimmy Doyle and Dan O'Leary in Currow, and had a lovely session. Those tapes were played over and over. After we were married for about a year, Agnes landed me with a fiddle belonging to her mother. Well, I played at

home and revived tunes Pdraig gave me. I spent many enjoyable hours playing away while my children, just toddlers at the time, loved to listen and dance around to the time of the music.

I enjoyed listening to the local musicians in Chicago - Johnny McGreevy, Pat Cloonan and many more. Paddy Cronin, from Reaboy, living in Boston at the time, came up to Chicago while I was there and he played in Hoban's Lounge. It was great to hear him. There were always the Comhaltas tours that we would never miss.

As time went by, the children were getting older, the eldest was starting school, so we had to make a decision on whether to stay or come back home, to be fair to them. So in 1977, we came home with our five children - Katie was 5, Eileen 4, Siobhan 3, David 2 and Paudie was 9 months old. In time we were blessed with three more children born in Ireland, Tom, Aggie and Sarah.

In 1978, the Tops of the Parish group from Leame asked if Katie and I would perform in their show. That year, Katie danced a jig and I played for her behind the scenes. Well, that was the first time I played out in years. Many people thought I was doing a mime. As the years went by from 1978 to the final show years later, the family were involved in the shows. They played fiddles, tin whistles, concertinas, and step-danced. By the time the last Tops show was held, Joe O'Sullivan from Scartagen, Katie's husband and a great flute player, joined us. We enjoyed performing in the Tops. The people involved in the show were very dedicated, hard-working and talented.

Nicky McAuliffe taught the children music and is still teaching the younger lads. He is a great teacher and has helped to keep music alive in and around Gneeveguilla. He has helped me expand my knowledge of tunes through teaching our children. They will always have the art of playing, whether it is for themselves or



*The musical Gleeson family.
Front (from left): Abbie and Sarah.
Middle: Eileen, Agnes and Katie.
Back: Paudie Junior, Siobhan, Dave,
Paudie and Tom.*

others. It is something you never forget and can always start up again. I am proof of that.

Jimmy Doyle and I got to be great friends, beginning with the Tops of the Parish. He used to bring me along to sessions and really got me joining in. We started playing together around that time in the Castle Heights Hotel, Killarney. Francie Brosnan, Tureenamult, joined us on spoons. Later, we played in Kilcummin village. Paddy Moynihan owned the pub and we had many a great night there with great set dancers, musicians and singers. We still go to many sessions together. As Jimmy always said, music would take you to a lot of places and enable you to meet many people. For years, coming home at night from a session, we would always have the craic about taking the 'yankee clipper' to the States. Just a couple of years ago it came to pass. Jimmy Doyle, Joe O'Sullivan, Tim Gleeson, Pat Doyle, Anne Keane and I were in Chicago, Milwaukee, and then Boston, playing our music for the dancers over there. We had a great time. A time never to forget.

I'm very fortunate now with all the great musicians around, that I'm able to join in sessions. We can go into Buckley's Bar in the Arbutus Hotel, Killarney, and meet Jimmy Doyle, John Brosnan, Tim Kerins, Joe O'Sullivan, Tim Gleeson, Tom Gleeson, Nicky & Anne McAuliffe, and many others in O'Connell's Pub in Knocknagree. Young Pat Doyle, Jimmy's nephew, myself and many others often have a good session and dance in Doyle's in Knocknagree. There are sessions and fleadh's at the present time in every town and village all year round. I have a great time meeting all different musicians. Irish music and dance is at an all time high. Long live the ceol!

Many thanks to Cumann Luachra for asking me to contribute to their journal. May God give me the health to be able to keep enjoying, playing and meeting all my fellow musicians and friends for many years to come.

THE BLIND FIDDLER

By

Sheila Kerin

(Kerin's Pub, Ballydesmond, Co. Cork.)

When I was but a wee colleen
Back in thirty-four
A roving Fiddler, astride an ass
Came rambling to our door.
My grandma then she greeted him
As friends are bound to do,
'God bless you, Tom, it's been so long
There's a welcome here for you.'

His name it was Tom Billy,
A fiddler blind was he
Who was known to every 'Public House'
From Puck to Knocknagree,
Where friendly arms would guide him
To a seat beside the hob
Those sightless eyes they seemed alive
And his music made one sob.

Though young I was I talked non-stop
Which irritated Tom
And he christened me 'Ceann Comhairle'
Which brought laughter from my mom.

He travelled on his donkey
Where'er it was he went
But when he arrived in our little town
The poor old ass was spent.

He's fiddling now in Heaven,
Since he's gone to his reward
And the angels dance around him
To music worthy of award.
May God be with Tom Billy
Our fiddler of renown
Who brought joy and sorrow
To the hearts in Ballydesmond town.

(NOTE: Sheila Kerin now lives in California, USA.)