

MY LIFE AND MUSIC

Maurice O'Keeffe

If someone told me as a 'gorsoon' that I would one day be writing my story from a well known magazine I would say they were 'off their head', "Bíonn gach tosnú lag" and indeed when I started on the fiddle as a 10-year-old, little did I think that I would make any success of it. Like many other musician and, I was inspired by many people but, notably, my late mother. She often told my in later life that as a child I was always whistling and 'diddling' so she predicted even at the early stage I had some musical talents.

My mother, Molly, was one of the O'Connells (Morrisseys) of Glencollins, a very well known musical family. She played the concertina and the old 'three stopper' melodeon. Her brother, Jerh, was also very talented and he played the pipes, the concert flute and the fiddle. My aunt, Helen, was a beautiful concertina player. I should point out that my father's family were not musical and must often have been annoyed and tormented by the rest of us belting out jigs and reels.

All of my own brothers and sisters were well known as musicians, singers and dancers. The best known would be Kit (Hickey), in Cullen, who won numerous prizes at feiseanna and fleadh ceoil for her sean-nós singing.

My late mother bought me my first fiddle in Scanlons, Ballydesmond, for the princely sum of 25 old shillings (£1.25) and that was without a case. (For the benefit of the younger generations Scanlons



Maurice O'Keeffe playing in O'Connells bar, Knocknagree.

was a little shop situated where Willie Sheehan's offices now are). My first teacher was Johnny Linehan, of Glounreigh, a music teacher who taught several other budding musicians. He held classes in his own home and travelled to places like Lynchs, of Lishlelane, and Galvins, of Doon, to meet his pupils. Johnny Billy Murphy, Nellie Cashman (nee Angland) and my own first cousin, Gretti O'Keeffe, who later emigrated to America were some of his best known pupils. I have many memories of my lessons with Johnny Linehan. Every pupil's first task was to learn the gammit (scale) and for this the fee was 10 shillings which in those days were a considerable fee. Every tune after that cost 8d. When I started with Johnny he was quite an old man and, as far as I know, he did not take on any more pupils. Maybe for this reason he gave me special attention. As a music master he was very strict and would not accept any sloppy work or half measures. On one particular occasion when I was supposed to visit him I was so afraid that I decided to "mitch", I hid in the glen and when my mother enquired if I had a new tune I told her that I did not because I had not the previous one learnt "by heart". By some chance my secret leaked and Mr. Linehan informed my mother. His message to her read "Tell that 'barrow fellow' attend me tomorrow". My mother escorted me and I never missed another session.

I suppose having gone to a music master like Johnny Linehan benefited me immensely because he gave me all the old tunes which he had. In later years, I played some of these tunes for Pádraig



A session in progress (from left): John Coakley, Maurice O'Keeffe, Kitty Murphy, David Scannell, Peg O'Keeffe and Jack Brosnan.

O'Keeffe and he had never heard some of them. I later had the pleasure of recording these tunes for Peter Browne of R.T.E., and have since given them to such well known artists as Jackie Daly, Maura O'Keeffe and "the Monks of the Skrew". Some of the tunes are now stored in the archives in Dublin.

After the death of Johnny Linehan, I continued learning tunes from my mother. Our house at that time was the local 'rambling house'. People flocked in from as far a field in Dromscarra and on two nights a week, we would have recitations from the likes of Jimmy Jack Jim, songs from Darby Cronin and my sister Kit, amongst others, step dancing and a popular set called 'High Call Cap'. On other nights we would congregate at Han Shea's (Cronins) and I can tell you I had plenty practice.

My first venture into the outside world was to play at Keelhahulla Hall. I played there with Denis Dennehy, of Laharn, who played the 'box'. The entrance fee there was 3 old pence and we were paid 2 shillings a man. Around this same time I played in Den Sheehan's Hall in Knocknagree, with the Buckley Brothers, of Caherbarnagh, and later with Con Mike Murphy of Knocknashinnagh, Cullen. I played in Keelnahulla with Timmy O'Riordan and Denis Feehin. At a later stage, Tom Greaney and Michael Linehan joined us. I played in Boherbue Hall and Cullen Hall with Danny Boy O'Sullivan on the 'box' and Connie Linehan, from Dooneen, on saxophone.

In the late forties and early fifties, a dramatic change came on the dancing scene when local musicians were replaced by the show bands. At this time, Irish traditional music was at an all time low and this lasted until the revival in the bars around the early sixties. In this respect, enormous credit is due to Dan O'Connell, of Knocknagree, who was the first man to open his doors to traditional music. Denis Murphy and Johnny O'Leary were the resident musicians. Whenever I joined them for a session I was greatly encouraged and they inspired me to take up my fiddle again. To both of them and Dan O'Connell I owe a lot. Many other lounge bars now saw that traditional music was becoming popular again and around this time I played in Tom McCarthy's, Castleisland, Moynihan's, Riordan's and Walsh's in Cullen, 'The Three Counties' in Brosna, 'The Arch' in Newmarket, the three bars in Kiskeam and the four bars

in Ballydesmond.

Just in case you would think that I did nothing else but play music, I would like to point out that I found time to get married and in 1997 my wife Peg (nee McAuliffe) and I celebrated our Golden Jubilee. We have lived all our married life where I was bred, born and reared in Glounreigh, where we have great neighbours. We had eight in family so you can see we had more than music in the house. We had four boys and four girls, but one of the bad days of our life was in Oct. 1979 when our youngest son, Jeremiah, was tragically killed in a road accident. Our great faith in God, and the help of our good neighbours helped us to survive this traumatic time in our lives. Again music was a great fall back on this sad occasion. Sgt. Tom Power and the then Parish Priest of Ballydesmond, Fr. James O'Keeffe, advised me to take a month's break and then return to my usual routine. I will never forget the ovation I received when I went on stage in Moynihan's, in Cullen, on my first night back. That gesture truly brought home to me the kindness and support of people when I was feeling low. At the time of writing and at the latest count Peg and I have been blessed with 14 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren.

In my day job, I worked with the Cork County Council as a road worker for 38 years. I can remember that my first pay was 5 shillings a day and I worked under 22 local engineers and 6 county engineers. During the War years we were all transferred to Glountanefinane to cut turf which was needed in hospitals and other institutions. We worked 9 hours a day for 7 shillings a day. In 1946, when things began to improve I was appointed a ganger at a young age when a vacancy arose. I suppose that fact that my



Recording Franf Hall's TV Programme, Kiskeam, 1974.

father had been a ganger for many years did me no harm. Later on I was appointed an overseer and had responsibility for the district from Castlemagner to the Blackwater.

I had many memorable and happy days with Cork County Council but I suppose the occasion I remember best was my encounter with the late and great Frank Hall of R.T.E. In 1974, he was in this area doing a feature on John B. Keane when he noticed us working hard on the road between Kiskeam and Boherbue. He decided to stop and interview some of us. He spoke to my colleagues Jerh Murphy, Ned Dennehy, Dan Scannell, Michael Herlihy and Thady O'Connell who was driving Howard's tractor. Later he joined us for our lunch and listened as I played a few tunes. There was tremendous local interest when the programme was transmitted the following week. To put the icing on the cake I got a cheque for £7 from R.T.E. and the boys got £2 each.

As a young fella, I was considered a 'handy' footballer and I played for many years and enjoyed the game immensely. I usually played as corner forward and often came in for rough treatment from burly corner backs. My motto was to always stay near the goals in my position and not ramble out the field. Sooner or later chances would come and I scored many goals. This, of course, did not please my markers and they often made this known to me in no uncertain terms. I won a minor championship medal with Boherbue in 1936. In the early forties I played Tureen and my team mates included 'Small John' O'Leary, Johnny Pad O'Leary, Mick Leader, John P and with Neily O'Sullivan and 'Mick Thady Denny' Murphy. Other Kiskeam players on that team were Jer. Scannell and Dan Culloty. We played in a league in Gneeveguilla and won the final. After the final whistle there was an almighty brawl and we had to run for our lives. I suppose the Gneeveguilla crowd didn't like to see a bunch of Cork fellas going away with the trophies. I won a Duhallow championship medal with my native Kiskeam in 1947 and in later years one of my proudest moments was when the club won a Cork County Junior Championship in 1964. I have always been a keen follower of the game and I believe that the present days players are more skillful and much fitter. I am also very conscious of the great Cork-Kerry rivalry in our locality and Dan Connells' bar can be dangerous on the night of a Munster Final.

I have also fond memories of the days I played trumpet with Kiely's famous Kiskeam Brass Band. We were known all over Munster and played at foot-

ball matches, meetings and every year at Knocknagree Races. Fr. O'Flynn, parish priest of Ballydesmond, used to invite us to play at the church on St. Patrick's Day and also at the Corpus Christi Procession. During Mass we were positioned on the gallery and the din must have been deafening especially, with the big drum rolled and 16 brass instruments struck up 'Faith of our Fathers'. On St. Patrick's Day Fr. O'Flynn would lead the parade on a horse decorated in green.

I could go on and on with stories of music, romance, football and 'delivery' but I'm afraid space won't allow. I'm grateful to Cumann Luachra for giving me the opportunity of sharing some of my memories. At the moment I'm as busy as ever, playing at sessions, recording tapes, meeting other musicians from all over the country and continually on the look out for new material. There is nothing I enjoy more than to sit down at home and play my fiddle, something I do everyday. Music has been good to me and I have been lucky enough to play in England and the United States. I thank the Lord for whatever talent he has given me and the health to continue playing and sharing my music with many people.



Maurice as a child with mother, Molly and grandmother Mary O'Connell (nee O'Callaghan), 1924.