

# Pádraig O'Keefe: The Last Fiddle Master

by Pat Feeley

**P**atrick O'Keefe, or Patrick Keefe as he was called by his friends, or Pádraig O'Keefe as he was known to followers of Irish folk music, was born on October 8th 1887 at Glountane, a remote mountainy district in East Kerry about half way between the Kerry town of Castleisland and the North Cork village of Ballydesmond, or Williamstown, as it was then called. The child's father, John Leahy-O'Keefe, then thirty six years of age, was the principal teacher in Glountane National School, the local primary school. His mother, Margaret O'Callaghan, who was twenty seven when Pádraig, her first child, was born, was a native of Doon, or Doonasleen, a district to the south of Kiskeam in County Cork.

The O'Callaghans were well known locally as folk musicians and singers. Margaret's mother was a fine singer and Margaret herself is remembered as a delightful concertina player and a competent fiddle player. Other members of the family, her brothers Batt, Pete and 'Cal' and her sister, Bina, also played the fiddle. Her brother 'Cal' (short for Callaghan) O'Callaghan was highly regarded locally as a musician and was often called on to play for house dances and parties in the area.

John O'Keefe and Margaret O'Callaghan were married in 1887. Pádraig was born the same year and seven more children were born to the couple in the years that followed. The family lived in a spacious two storey, stone-built house with a slate roof about a hundred yards from the school. The house was superior to most other houses in the district and, as the family of the school master, they were better off than most of the other families in the area. Indeed many of the people were very poor, something remarked on by a schools' inspector in a report on the school in 1904. He noted that 'the locality is very poor'. For even in a part of the country where rushy fields and small holdings are the norm, it still stands out as a district remarkably mountainy, desolate and wild. It is high and exposed with an average elevation of around nine hundred feet above sea level. The land is cold, wet, boggy and inhospitable. The district's landscape is captured in its place names, which tell of mountains and hills, windy peaks and stony fields: Knocknaboul, Knockfeha, Knockeenahone, Knockane-fune, Barraveha and Carriganes.

In order to know and understand Pádraig O'Keefe, the man, it is necessary to know something of his background, because he was very much a product of it. His father was the dominant influence in

his early life in many ways and he seems to have spent a lot of his life reacting against this and being as unlike him as possible.

If one asks the people of the area what kind of a man John Leahy-O'Keefe was, the word that without fail will be used to describe him is 'strict'. 'He was very strict' or 'Oh very different to Pádraig, a strict man', one will be told.

A wit once remarked that the Irish were a very honest race for they rarely spoke well of one another. It can also be said that they seldom speak ill of the dead and will always soften anything bad they have to say.

It is this way, as a euphemism, that 'strict' can best be understood. O'Keefe Senior was in fact highly unpopular with a large section of the local community as a result of his harsh treatment of their children. In order to understand the family's relationship with their neighbours and the atmosphere in which the child O'Keefe grew up, it is necessary to look at John O'Keefe's relations with the parents in some detail.

Between January and June 1890 there was a partial boycott of the school with as many as forty-five children being kept at home because of the teacher's treatment of his pupils.

A schools' inspector reported that O'Keefe had made himself unpopular by undue severity to pupils and by exaction in certain cases of school fees regarded by the parents as excessive. (At the time teachers were paid partly by the National Board of Education on the basis of a results system and partly by the parents of the pupils). The inspector said that he found it difficult to obtain 'evidence of sufficient character' to indicate an extreme degree of severity. (It can be seen from reading this particular report that the inspector was inclined to take the side of the teacher and to minimise the causes of the complaint). However, he informed the Commissioners of Education that the teacher in question had been summoned to appear before the magistrates for undue severity on three occasions and that complaints had been made against him several times including complaints that the fees he charged to labourers were as much as those he charged to farmers. In his conclusion he played down what had occurred by saying that it was not a boycott but a withdrawal of pupils because of the teachers' 'indiscretion'.

The subtle difference does not seem to have impressed the Commissioners for they wrote to the manager, Archdeacon Irwin, the Parish Priest of Castleisland, telling him to warn O'Keefe against any further undue severity and they directed the District Inspector, Mr. T. Steede, to investigate the affair.

Inspector Steede carried out a detailed investigation. He interviewed eight parents of thirty children not attending the school and confirmed that the reason for their non-attendance was the principal's harshness and severity.

He told of how O'Keefe had beaten a pupil, Margaret Daly, on the head and neck, for which he was summonsed and for which he had to pay costs, of his slapping another child, Ellie Reidy, on the hands and head, or beating John Lynch, aged 9, and of pulling his hair.

In December 1888, he was again summonsed for beating one of the children, a girl named Lizzie Brosnan, but the case was settled by O'Keefe agreeing to forego school fees then due to him from the family.

Another child, Pat Fitzgerald, was beaten on the head in March 1889 and was ill for many months afterwards, while there were several complaints of the teacher calling names to pupils in school and to their parents at other times.

In October 1889, he was once more before the court, this time for beating a boy named John Fitzgerald, whose mother had been to the school on a number of occasions complaining of the teacher's treatment of her child. This case was dismissed.

On the question of excessive fees, Inspector Steede reported that John Lynch, a labourer, and Eliza Fitzgerald, a labourer's wife, complained that they were charged the full rates of fees ranging from one shilling for a pupil in first class to four shillings for a pupil in sixth. (The fees went up by six pence for each class as the pupil progressed upwards through the school). After numerous complaints from parents, O'Keefe agreed to a reduction on condition that the children attended school regularly and earned result fees. However, he held them to this and would not accept the second part of the reduced fee from one Thomas Daly because he had not seen his children's examination results. Daly went to the school to remonstrate with him and to try to persuade him to accept the money, but in the altercation that followed, Daly, who was lame, claimed that O'Keefe, who was about six feet tall, pushed him and caused him to fall

against the pillars of the school gates. O'Keeffe denied this.

Inspector Steede also reported that the teacher's brother, Daniel O'Keeffe, was prominent in the boycott. He had kept his three children at home because of a family dispute. He was claiming that he should not have to pay school fees as he was part owner of the house in which the teacher lived rent free and that the latter also owed him money for grazing. John O'Keeffe denied that his brother had any claim to the house and he said that he had paid him for the grazing.

In his summary, the inspector said that it was clear that the parents were unwilling to send their children to the school and that some parents had transferred their sons and daughters to Scartaglin school, and to the national school in Williamstown (Ballydesmond), though they were not allowed to remain in these schools. He said he believed that the teacher was unduly severe, but not to the extent complained of by some parents and he also believed that the fees charged to labourers were excessive.

The manager of the school, Archdeacon Irwin, told the inspector that he would investigate any complaints of undue severity as soon as he was informed of these by the Commissioners. He also said that the fees for labourers' children should not be more than a shilling a quarter irrespective of what class they were in and that the teacher should not go to law with parents on school matters without first consulting him.

There is no further mention of the boycott after this, so we can assume that the teacher and the parents reached some kind of understanding, a *modus vivendi*. However, as can be seen from the reports, it was remarkably bitter and revealed a deep current of bad feeling and animosity towards O'Keeffe in the small, mountain community. The teacher's children would have grown up aware of this atmosphere and would have reacted to it in one way or another.

It was not until 1904 that O'Keeffe and the school were again brought to the formal attention of the Commissioners. This was in an inspector's report in February of that year which noted that the children had no playground as the principal teacher had planted a plot attached to the school with potatoes, cabbage, turnips and mangolds.

The manager, at this time, Monsignor John O'Leary, P.P. V.F., Castleisland, was asked for an explanation. He replied that the ground in question was very rugged and uneven and required tillage in order to be made suitable for a playground.

In March 1904 the teacher was reported as saying that he would prepare it for a playground when the crops that were in the ground were lifted. It was, however, five years and many reports later before this was done, for it was not until September 1909 that a report was filed saying that the vegetable plot had finally been sown with grass seed.

The cabbage garden affair is on the

whole a fairly humorous business and in fairness there does seem to have been a tradition of planting vegetables in the plot but it does at the same time indicate a certain selfishness and a lack of concern for the children who, deprived of their playground, were forced to play on the rough, narrow road outside the school gate.

When he reached school going age, Pádraig went to his father's school across the road. But when he got a bit bigger he was sent to live with his maternal grandfather and uncles over the county boundary in Doon, County Cork. This was a common country custom at the time and was practised especially where there was a large family. He remained with his O'Callaghan uncles and aunts, attending the local school, Ummeraboy National School, until he completed his primary education. All the evidence suggests that this was a very happy period of his life. The O'Callaghan's were small farmers and, as we have seen earlier, the family were interested in music and dancing. All the uncles and aunts played musical instruments and the old man of the house, the grandfather, was a step dancer. It was a house of music, and house dances and parties were held regularly. Young O'Keeffe got on well with his relatives who liked his pleasant, easy manner and his quiet ways. In the words of one of them, "We were mad about him". At this time he was said to have been particularly close to his cousin, Bina O'Callaghan.

The Doon years were formative ones and were an undoubted influence on him. His interest in and love for Irish folk music can be traced to this period and to the musical O'Callaghans. He acknowledged his debt to the people and the place by naming a number of tunes after them - Callaghan's reel, Callaghan's hornpipe, the Doon reel and so on.

The young O'Keeffe returned to Glountane when he had finished his primary education, probably about 1901. By this time there were eight children in the family, five boys and three girls, ranging from Pádraig who was thirteen to William, the baby, who was six months old and the family had a domestic servant employed, a local girl, named Nancy Brosnan, aged fifteen.

We do not know what exact form his education took after this. His father may have given him private tuition for a period and one can take it that he helped in some way to prepare him for the career in teaching on which he was now embarked. Local tradition has it that he went to a teachers' training college in Dublin, where he trained as a national teacher. This was probably the training college in Marlborough Street because St. Patrick's Training College, Drumcondra, has no record of him being a student there.

Whether or not he ever had any real interest in teaching or any vocation for it is doubtful, considering the disinterest he later showed and the offhand manner in which he turned his back on it. His father was a strong-willed, domineering man and

in all probability it was he who decided that his eldest son should follow in his footsteps.

It is also said that his father got him to take formal lessons on the violin and to study musical theory. We do not know for certain whether or not he ever had any formal tuition, but Seamus Ennis said that he knew music theory and understood harmony, counterpoint and modal progressions as well as he did.

In October 1913, the master's daughter, Nora O'Keeffe, was given a post in the school as a Junior Assistant Mistress. In the meantime Pádraig had successfully completed his training and was teaching in the area. His father's health began to fail around this time and Pádraig was given temporary employment as a substitute in the school while his father was out sick. When his father had recovered sufficiently to return to work, the son got another temporary post in Clogher Boys' National School near Ballymacelligot. He was teaching there when his father's final illness occurred and he returned to Glountane to take over.

His father died on April 30th 1915 and Pádraig was appointed principal of the school on May 17th 1915 at a salary of £56 per annum. The other teacher in the school was his sister, Nora, who married a man named Carmody some years later.

Almost from the very beginning Pádraig seems to have failed to make any favourable impression on the schools' inspectors. Less than six months after his appointment, in October 1915, an inspector requested the manager, Monsignor O'Leary, 'to draw the special attention of the teacher to irregularities reported and to omissions in records'. In September 1916 the principal's work was said to be 'lacking in force' which the principal had explained by saying that 'he was unwell'.

This constituted a pattern. Pádraig was often unwell, especially in the mornings, for his nights were increasingly spent at house dances, parties and music sessions where he played the fiddle and drank deep and late into the night.

His first and only real romance also dates from this period. He is said to have fallen in love with a local girl named Scollard, who came from a family of well-known step dancers in the area. He, it is said, wanted to marry the girl but his family disapproved of her and were adamantly opposed to any suggestion of marriage. With nothing coming of Pádraig's wooing, the girl emigrated to America. But, as local tradition has it, she did not forget him and sent him back the fare to New York which he, so the story goes, drank.

She was, it would seem, the first and last woman in his life. For he had, by now, discovered his two real loves - traditional Irish music and Guinness's stout. In time he came to regard music as his first love, even to the extent of referring to the fiddle as his *missus*. His good friend, Seamus Ennis, himself a traditional musician as well as a storyteller, broadcaster and collector of music, once asked him about



Pádraig O'Keeffe.

this and this is what he said: "I'm not married. That's the only wife I have. I'm wedded to her and a great wife too, no trouble at all. One stroke of the bow across the belly and she purrs".

With regard to teaching, there seems to be general agreement amongst those who knew him that he had no real interest in it. Pádraig liked the fresh air, the open road, a walk across the mountain tracks, the talk and the company of the men in the pubs and playing and drinking until late at night. The preparation of work schemes, the routine of the school room, the correcting of essays and sums, the

dust from the chalk and the floor, the breaths of the children misting up the windows that looked out on the cold, watery bogland, the paint peeling on the dull school walls - these were not for him. The grey walls of the little school house hemmed in his wayward, undisciplined spirit that longed for the freedom of the roads and the smells, sounds and companionship of the Sliabh Luachra pubs.

But when it comes to his actual teaching and to his teaching ability there is disagreement amongst his former pupils. One of them whom we interviewed told us that he could not remember

learning anything much from him. The abiding memory he had of his school days was Pádraig playing the fiddle and all the children out on the floor dancing 'the crow step'. He claimed that his education at Glountane did not extend much beyond learning how 'to smoke tobacco and blow bubbles'.

Another ex-pupil of his was in total disagreement with this. She said that he was a great teacher with progressive and advanced ideas and methods. She told of him taking classes out into the fields to study nature and remembered his kindness and gentleness towards the children. There seems to be general agreement on this, which is in marked contrast with the way his father treated his pupils. But unfortunately there was also a consensus, it would seem, on his slapdash approach to the job, the missed mornings, the lost days and his failure to apply himself. After a few years the parents of the children became increasingly dissatisfied with him. Some of them complained him to the school manager. Others transferred their children to the neighbouring school of Kilmurry.

In March 1918 he was formally ticked off in an inspector's report for his 'remissness' in regard to the disappearance of a piece of school property and he was warned to take adequate care of such property in the future 'under pain of serious consequences'.

In May of the same year the inspector again visited the school and informed him 'that unless he performs his duties as a teacher efficiently and makes proper preparation for his work, the question of his fitness for continued recognition as principal must engage attention'. He was also told, for good measure, that he should see to it that 'the dusting of the school room is attended to sufficiently'.

Pádraig was not above answering these criticisms. In April 1919 he informed an inspector that the school had not been whitewashed or cleaned since 1915.

In October 1919 there was a further inspection following which the 'principal Mr. O'Keeffe' was reported as being 'wanting in energy'. It was also noted that he had not drawn up his schemes of work and was 'not systematic in his preparations'. The inspector gave it as his private opinion that he was in fact 'becoming less efficient'.

In December extracts from the inspectors' reports were sent to him and he was informed 'that the continued unsatisfactory condition of the school is noted'. He was asked to make 'a vigorous effort' to effect a substantial measure of improvement 'failing which serious action will be taken in his regard'.

It must at this stage have been obvious to him that his dismissal was imminent and he decided to pre-empt it in his own inimitable way. This is how Seamus Ennis told the story:

"There was one night Pádraig was at a spree and it was a summer night and a lovely sunny morning. About half past six or seven in the morning Pádraig landed

home and he didn't have to go to school until half nine. So he walked into Castleisland and went into a public house and called for a pint of stout. The local hackneyman, the local taxi, he came in and he says: 'Pádraig, I've a man down there trying to hire my car to go out and inspect your school - a school inspector' and Pádraig said to him: 'Is he a tall thin fellow or is he a small red-haired fellow?' 'Oh a small red-haired fellow'. Then Pádraig says: 'you take him out to my school and ask him to inspect it, and tell him you saw me and that I said I hope he finds the school up to specification and everything in order there, because he won't find me there any more'.

And that was how he resigned from the job. His service as a teacher with the National Board of Education terminated officially on June 30th 1920. It was to all intents and purposes the end of his permanent employment. True, he worked at one regular job after this, but this was only for a very short time.

In the years immediately following his resignation from teaching, he tried his hand at dealing in cattle. There was a little bit of land going with the house and he was able to rent grazing locally. But he soon discovered that he was not cut out to be a cattle dealer and he gave it up.

Some time later he got a job as a clerk in the Labour Exchange in Tralee, but he tired of this too after a short time and packed it in. That was the last job he was ever to hold and for the rest of his life his only source of income was the fiddle.

This was indeed a poor and precarious way to earn a living. But it was what suited. The money, such as it was, came from two sources - from fee paying engagements in dance halls and pubs and from teaching the fiddle to pupils. These engagements were at different times of his life and for periods of varying duration. For instance, at one time he used to play in McCarthy's pub in Castleisland and used to refer to himself as 'Tom McCarthy's orchestra'. At another time he had a regular Sunday night engagement together with his two protégés, Denis and Julia Murphy, to play for dances in Lacka Hall near Ballydesmond, while during another period he had a regular booking for Vaughan's Hall at Clamper Cross, north of Ballydesmond. He was also frequently invited to play for house dances, for which he was sometimes paid a few shillings and for which musicians were always treated to food and drink for the night. However, the money he made from teaching the fiddle was probably his most consistent and steady source of income.

It may be as well at this point to look at the system and form of teaching that he followed and in time made his own. He was a travelling teacher and went around the countryside visiting and teaching pupils in their homes, though, for a short period in the early days, he taught pupils in his house on Sundays.

After some years his daily routine became well established. Each day he set

off walking through the countryside to visit his students and earn some money to pay for the evening's entertainment and relaxation in the village pubs. His pupils were to be found over a very wide stretch of country in districts as far apart as Rathmore, Farranfore, Scartaglin, Brosna, Knocknagree, Currow and Ballydesmond. It is estimated that he often walked over twenty miles a day and it was as a peripatetic teacher of the fiddle that he became so well-known to the people of the countryside.

He varied his teaching methods to suit the ability and dedication of individual pupils. But in general he took it slow at the beginning and concentrated on tone production. To some he dictated every detail of bowing technique, while with others he was content to pass on the tune, relying on their natural ability to perfect the details.

Most sources agree that he liked to instruct his pupils in bowing and this is usually the only aspect of playing that he described in detail in his tablature system of instruction. Both Seamus Ennis and Jerry Collins, former pupils of Pádraig's, say that he always recommended finishing dance tunes on an up-bow to give them an added lift. Another feature of his playing, which he passed on to his pupils, was the use of the bow at full length and the tendency to play more notes per bow stroke than other traditional musicians. These characteristics have also been noticed in Julia Murphy's playing and in the playing styles of other pupils of his.

On a sheet of paper he ruled out five lines. The spaces between the lines represented the four strings of the fiddle. Number 1 meant to apply the first finger, 2 meant apply second finger and so on. A tick above a note represented an up bow, no tick stood for a down bow. A curved line over several notes indicated that they were all bowed in the same direction. An 'R' stood for repeat. Seamus Ennis described the system as 'highly ingenious'.

His pupils regarded it as a very effective and simple system of instruction, though it is not as comprehensive as some of the modern tablature systems in use today. It could only be used in conjunction with an actual demonstration and rhythmic emphasis, as well as other aspects of technique and performance, are not indicated or dealt with.

In later years when some of his pupils came to play with bands or wanted to learn tunes from printed collections, it was a source of regret with them that he did not teach them staff notation. (Julia Murphy, who married another local musician named John Clifford, later learned to read music when she was living in London and playing with Irish bands in the halls and clubs).

If music manuscript paper was not available, which was frequently the case, Pádraig would draw the lines for the tablature on the page of a copybook using the bow of the fiddle as a ruler. It was also quite common when his pupils, or fellow

musicians, met him in a pub for him to write a tune on any scrap of paper that was available, often on the inside of a cigarette box. The story is even told of a famous occasion when he met Denis Murphy, who was cutting turf in the bog. Denis began to ask him about a particular tune and Pádraig drew lines on the turf and marked out the notes for him. Denis retitled the piece of music, The Bank of Turf.

When he had taught the pupil the basics, the lessons often became more informal, though one of his pupils, Mikie Duggan of Scartaglin, told us that he always maintained a teacher-pupil relationship and was at all times very much the teacher. But this, like his teaching methods, may have varied from pupil to pupil. When the pupils reached a certain level of proficiency, the lessons consisted of writing out new tunes for them to learn. He would play these a couple of times for them and then leave them to practise and perfect them. Julia Clifford remarked: "he was always in a hurry. He used to just write the tune for me in his own code and I'd learn it".

In his peregrinations of the hill country, from Farranfore to the banks of the Feale, he followed definite routes. He organised his travels so that he was able to take in all the pupils of a district in one visit. He often came to beginners twice a week but as they became more proficient this was reduced to once a month. It was often left up to the pupil or his parents to pay whatever they could for the lesson. This ranged from six old pence to four shillings, the average being about a half crown. The most remarkable aspect of all the system was the number of years that different individuals stayed on as pupils. Mikie Duggan, for instance, became a pupil of his at the age of fourteen and remained so for up on twelve years. Jerry McCarthy was with him from 1939 to 1945. Paddy O'Connell of Cordal, who has a large collection of O'Keefe's tunes in manuscript form, was under his tutelage for about nine years. This really is a tribute to the number of tunes he had rather than any reflection on the abilities of his pupils. For basically what he was doing most of those years was teaching them new tunes.

Probably his best known and most accomplished pupils were Denis and Julia Murphy, (known as the 'Waver' Murphys because their grandfather was a weaver), from Lisheen Cross near the village of Gneevgullia in East Kerry. Paddy and Johnny Cronin, also from Gneevgullia, became two good traditional fiddle players, but both of them emigrated to the United States where they came under the influence of Sligo-style musicians and developed styles that were quite different to the one they learned from O'Keefe. Jerry McCarthy, who now lives in Dublin, was also in the United States for a number of years, in New York, but he seems to have retained the local style fairly intact. Mikie Duggan, another of Pádraig's pupils, is a farmer in the Scartaglin area

and has for a number of years been playing with the accordionist, Johnny O'Leary, at music sessions and polka set competitions in Dan O'Connell's public house in Knocknagree.

Day and night, winter and summer, in good weather and bad, the figure of the former school master was to be seen on the rutted, winding roads of East Kerry and North Cork, an old tweed cap on his head, his unkempt bush of black hair sticking out from underneath it. He usually dressed in a gabardine raincoat that had seen better days, a dark jacket and trousers and an old-fashioned collarless shirt with a stud button. When setting out walking he had a peculiar habit of pushing the lapel of one collar through the button hole of the other. At other times he pinned the lapels of the collar around his throat with a large safety pin. These were the habits of a man accustomed over the years to facing into the cold, wintry rain and harsh, sleety, winds from the mountains.

In Sliabh Luachra O'Keefe is remembered as much as a character as a musician. In an obituary that appeared in the local paper, *The Kerryman*, he was described as a 'great character'. The word 'character' as used amongst country people is something of a two-edged sword and can mean not just someone who is witty, humorous and good company, but also a person who is unworldly and unwise, if not downright foolish, and this undoubtedly was how he was perceived by many local people who considered it foolish and irresponsible to have thrown up a secure, pensionable job for an impecunious life as a player and teacher of the fiddle. Their attitude at its best was one of amused tolerance, at its worst one of downright disapproval.

It was customary for itinerant school masters, music teachers and dancing masters to be good story tellers. They were, in fact, traditional carriers of news and gossip in times when newspapers did not circulate amongst the ordinary people and when indeed many country people were illiterate. O'Keefe was no exception and carried on this tradition. He had a large store of anecdotes and stories which he told in his own inimitable way. He had a deep voice and a thick Kerry accent and his speech was rich in Irish words and Hibernicisms. His face was soft and flabby and very expressive and he usually followed one of his amusing yarns or witty remarks with a laugh that took the form of a nasal snort. To his listeners this was an added source of laughter and amusement.

Many have remarked on his good nature and his kindness and his jokes and stories were in keeping with these traits. For while often quirky and amusing, they were free of malice and vulgarity. Indeed there was a total absence of malice, vindictiveness and animosity in the man.

His sense of humour was droll and very rural and local in its content and expression. Probably, the best way to try to capture it is to give examples of it rather

than to try to describe it, though much of the humour in the stories is lost in print. For instance, he used to tell the story of how one night he was in his favourite haunt, Jack Lyons's pub in Scartaglin:

"I was in the front bar and in came these people, two men and a woman. A young woman. And they said 'Pádraig, will you play a tune and she'll dance to it'. And I got the fiddle and started in with a reel - Bonny Kate. And then suddenly there was a raid. It was after hours. The Guards came in and I was playing away engrossed with Bonny Kate and the girl dancing, and I wasn't watching out. I was playing away with my backside to the counter. 'What's your name?' the Guards. And she had gone, the dancer, all scattered, all gone like that. And there was I with my backside to the counter flogging Bonny Kate. Seven shillings and six pence Bonny Kate cost me".

Pádraig was not anti-clerical or irreligious but somewhat lax and careless about attending Mass and other religious observances. At one time the Redemptorists, famous for their fire and brimstone sermons, came to Startaglin to preach at a mission and all the people were flocking in to hear them. At first Pádraig showed no great interest in the mission but then, since everybody else around was going, he decided one evening to go too. He was, however, a bit late starting out and as he was walking, he was certainly going to be very late arriving. Seeing this, a man and a woman in a pony trap stopped and asked him if he would like a lift. "Yerra no", says Pádraig, "I'd prefer to walk". "But you'll be late", says the woman. "Yerra I'll be there in time for the hornpipe", says he. (The hornpipe being the last part of the polka set).

Another time he went to confession, where he had not been for quite some time, and the priest began to shout and roar at him "Go aisy you divil you or you'll be heard in Maol", Pádraig said to him. (Maol was a mountain and bog to the north of Gneevgullia; O'Keefe named a tune after it, *The Top of Maol*).

Part of the fascination of his stories comes from his quaint and original use of language. He expressed himself strikingly and clearly in the vernacular of the area, drawing his words and images from the speech of the people in a fresh, imaginative manner. He had a way of dressing up fairly ordinary things in quaint concepts and strange settings.

He once had a good fiddle and this is how he described what happened to it: "The first wife, one night at a spree, after I played for a while, I was out at the gable end with some lads and I was handed a jug of porter. I left her down to rest against the wall and forgot her, there in the rain. She never did a day's good after that but fell asunder from the rheumatics on me".

He had his own way of drinking pints of stout. When he got the first pint he emptied it down to this thumb, 'below the tops of the chapel windows' he used to say referring to two indentations on the old pint glasses. After a few pints he used to

say he was 'purring'. After a few more he was 'purring high' and when he came to the fifth or sixth he was, in his own phraseology, in 'second bulling'.

O'Keefe was not the only peripatetic fiddle master in that part of the country. There was also the equally well-known and highly-regarded musician from Glencollins, Ballydesmond, Tom Billy Murphy. Tom Billy, as he was always called, was born in the eighteen seventies, and was at least ten years older than Pádraig. Blind and partially lame from early childhood, he learned in his youth to play traditional music and became by dint of necessity (since he was debarred from most other ways of making a living by reason of his handicaps), a player and teacher of the fiddle. Tom's pupils were mostly in his own North Cork area, around Ballydesmond and Knocknagree, but he also had pupils further afield in the district of Kilcummin near Killarney, in Annagh near Castleisland and around Farranfore. Tom's music was never recorded so we don't really know how it sounded. However, if the playing of some of his pupils, like Jack O'Connell of the Lighthouse, Ballydesmond, or Dan O'Leary of Kilcummin, is any guide to it, he played in a simple, sweet, unornamented style.

Pádraig's star as the outstanding young exponent of Sliabh Luachra music began to ascend as Tom entered his declining years, and there was a certain amount of tension and rivalry between them. There are stories of Pádraig asking Tom for tunes and Tom refusing to play them for him.

Tom travelled about on the back of a donkey, which even at that time was considered a strange and outmoded form of transport. He, however, preferred it saying that he could hear better than in a cart. Tom, a small dark man with a protuberant nose, was a memorable figure as he rode his donkey from Knocknagree races to a house dance in Gneevgullia or a fair in Newmarket.

There was a lot of good feeling, sympathy and support for the peripatetic musician amongst the ordinary people. Tom Billy was often lodged and fed by his pupils or their parents and at other times they held dances to raise money for him. This supportive and hospitable attitude to travelling musicians continued throughout the nineteen fifties in this part of the country. This undoubtedly was a continuation of the old Gaelic tradition of hospitality towards travelling poets, teachers and musicians.

O'Keefe, as a former school-master, was treated with a certain respect, if not with some awe arising from his unusual life style and from the circumstances surrounding his resignation. In theatrical or artistic circles his way of life would have been described as bohemian but, in the uplands of East Kerry, it was considered different and set him that little bit apart.

Traditional musicians like O'Keefe and Tom Billy were also undoubtedly apprec-

iated by some people for providing a totally local and indigenous form of entertainment as well as carrying on, and indeed enriching, a highly distinctive style of folk music.

Even though O'Keeffe became a familiar figure and a constant traveller on the roads of Sliabh Luachra, he was never without a home. As the eldest son, he inherited the family house at Glountane and he lived with his mother until she died in 1938. After she died he lived alone. His sister, the teacher Mrs. Carmody, used to bake for him but other than that he looked after himself. Most nights then he returned home. But as he was a man who did not always plan his day, he sometimes found himself far from home when the pubs closed. At other times it might be raining, or on a cold wintry night the road to Glountane might seem very long. At such times he would make out the house of a friend or a pupil to seek shelter for the night. Often he just sat on a chair near the fire where he dozed until the morning. This is how John Clifford, a native of Gneevgullia, and his wife Julia, (the former Julia Murphy) remember Pádraig's late night knock on the door:

Julia: "He used to knock at everybody's house, anybody that knew him anyway, and there was music most places, and any hour of the night they'd leave 'm in ... he'd play all night ... He used to come in to me at night when the pubs closed and I was only a child and I'd be in bed. I was really mad on music ... I used to love to see 'm coming ... I'd be in bed anyway but I'd always get up out of bed and come down, and he'd say to me 'Julia, I'll write this one for you now'. And he used to play it so well and it just appealed so much to me that he'd play it a couple of times over, and I'd play it after 'm - without ever writing it down. The ear was that quick".

John: "And he'd be ... maybe coming in from Knocknagree Races say about three o'clock in the morning. You'd let him stay inside you know. Most people then were stuck for extra bedrooms. He wouldn't go anywhere. He'd put his two elbows on the table and rest awhile like that until morning. And I don't think he'd have a breakfast would he? And he might get a couple of bob from Denis (Murphy) and he'd go away as far as Gneevgullia and he might collect I suppose two or three bob more you know ..., give 'em a few tunes, and that's the way he lived all the whole time".

In assessing O'Keeffe's importance in the Sliabh Luachra tradition, it is necessary to view it from different perspectives.

In a historical sense O'Keeffe is generally recognised as an important pivotal figure who brought the music into modern times. He was once asked where he had learned his music and he said from the old Sliabh Luachra fiddlers. This in fact was the case. The underground sources had all converged and come to the surface in one sparkling, pellucid, stream. The music of Corny Drew of Drumultan, Fitzgerald of Lacka, the Callaghans of Doon and Tom Billy Murphy of Glen-

collins had all come together in the playing of one outstanding exponent of the style. Just as in the field of literature or art, a writer or painter brings to a synthesis and fruition the efforts of a number of others in a particular field.

O'Keeffe was also the principal carrier of the local tradition. He perfected and polished the Sliabh Luachra style and had a wider repertoire than any of the other musicians. It was also he who introduced the music to the larger world outside. He was playing good music when Seamus Ennis recorded him for the B.B.C. in September 1952 and some of these recordings were subsequently released on a disc titled "Kerry Fiddles" featuring Pádraig, Denis Murphy and Julia Clifford. He was also recorded by Diane Hamilton, the American collector of Irish folk music, in a field trip she made, accompanied by the Clancy brothers, in 1955. A recording of him made at this time can be heard on an L.P. titled "The Lark in the Morning".

But in truth Pádraig was on the way out when, in the late nineteen fifties and early sixties, it became fashionable and profitable to record traditional musicians and it was his pupils who benefited from this new-found interest in the music. Denis Murphy and his sister, Julia Clifford, made a number of records and some of his other pupils were also recorded on disc and for the radio. It was in this way then, mostly through his pupils, that his music was popularised.

O'Keeffe's repertoire was wider and more comprehensive than that of any of his fellow musicians. It is reckoned that he had up on four hundred tunes on which he could draw, the majority of these being dance tunes learned and played for the polka sets. These included polkas, jigs, slides, hornpipes and reels. At first these were played purely for dancing but in time they began to be played also for listening. O'Keeffe in particular was very concerned with the content and presentation of his music and spent more time than most playing just for people to listen. He worked up and polished his tunes to suit an audience and he tended to have and to play more ornate and intricate tunes than the typical local musician. He often abandoned the strict dance rhythms in the hornpipes to facilitate his own arrangements and to allow for the runs of extra notes he inserted. O'Keeffe is often credited with popularising reels in the area and he certainly had more of these than the average Sliabh Luachra musician. His reels were melodically strong and well-ornamented and sometimes had a sad quality, traces of a lament. He also had a lot of old jigs and a very impressive selection of slow airs. The following were amongst the slow airs he played most often: O'Donnell's Lament, O'Rahilly's Grave, Kingwilliamstown, An Raibh tú ag an gCarraig? (Were you at Carrick), O'Neill's Lament, The Blackbird, Táimse im chodhladh (I'm asleep), The Redhaired Boy, The Wounded Hussar and The Old Man Rocking the Cradle. The first three of these are local to the area and the last one

was Pádraig's party piece. He used to play it with the big iron key of the pub door in his teeth as a variable mute against the bridge of the fiddle and was able to make the fiddle say 'mamma, mamma' at the end of each melody line. To the ears of some it was a performance of doubtful taste. However, that aside, he was widely regarded as a great air player and the sweetness and beauty of his slow airs are still remembered.

With regard to his musical heritage, most local musicians have acknowledged their debt to him. Johnny O'Leary, the accordionist, one of the most accomplished local musicians of recent times, says that many of his tunes go back to O'Keeffe. Denis and Julia got most of their local tunes from him, as did most of his other pupils. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that his music makes up the bulk of the tunes played by today's musicians of the area.

Kerry has a reputation for rough music as opposed, say, to Clare or Sligo. This owes something to the fact that the music is played more simply in Kerry. In other counties tunes tend to be more varied and ornamented. This may be because the music of Sliabh Luachra is at an earlier stage of development. Certainly in O'Keeffe's time there was not much evidence of outside influence on the music. In the decade preceding the outbreak of the Second World War, the gramophone became popular in many parts of rural Ireland and recordings, usually American, of Irish folk music became available. These early gramophone records of outstanding traditional musicians like Michael Coleman and James Morrison were bought and listened to in Sliabh Luachra as elsewhere, but their influence did not extend to effecting any appreciable changes in the local style of playing. It is also noteworthy that music in this region had a practical function: it was played for dancing. This was in contrast with other parts of the country where the dancing was no longer practised and where the music was played solely for listening to. In this type of situation the musicians tended to show off and to demonstrate their skills in an excess of ornamentation, deviating from the original beat and rhythm of the tune. This treatment usually produced something that was superficially ornate and flashy but detached from its original purpose and accordingly lacking in meaning. Sliabh Luachra music was not like this.

In Sliabh Luachra the predominant fiddle style is direct and rhythmic. O'Keeffe tended to use the full length of the bow in long strokes to produce the maximum volume. He often got as many as ten notes to a stroke and it was rare for him to play one stroke to one note. He also used occasional grace notes and had a tendency to play flat, which produced a mournful quality. This sad quality has been noted in his reels. He rarely used trebling as a decorative device, but he employed a wide range of decorative

techniques with the left hand. He also had the unusual habit of retuning the fiddle for certain tunes and tuning it low to get a more responsive tone. His playing was remarkably careful, precise and well-pitched and he succeeded in achieving a surprising consistency of tone and pitch in his own performances, considering the poor quality and condition of the fiddles and bows he customarily used. He never seems to have had a good fiddle. One of his pupils described the fiddles he used to play as 'nothing better than boards' and sometimes they were held together with bits of string. He was known to make a temporary fiddle string with cotton thread and to repair his bow with a bottle cork. Towards the end of his life he had no fiddle at all, but the owners of some of his favourite pubs kept one for him to play when he visited them.

In discussing regional styles it is always necessary to bear in mind that individual musicians always introduce a personal dimension into their playing. This was true of O'Keefe. The self-conscious ornamentation and elaboration that is sometimes found in his playing of airs and hornpipes are purely personal and not representative of a style remarkable for its simplicity and directness. Some students of O'Keefe regard this excessive ornamentation and his use of crescendos and diminuendos to achieve certain effects as overdone, if not actually bad taste. Notwithstanding this, no one really questions the overall standard and quality of his playing.

Seamus Ennis, an expert on Pádraig and his music, has left us this description of his style: 'a light, agile flowing style with a wonderful pulsating vigour in the dance rhythms, with a tendency to gay, wild abandon in the slides and polkas. He had two distinct reel tempos, a lilting virtuoso and a galloping dance. He bowed a lot or slurred a lot as taste dictated; his taste was impeccable and his touch clean'.

There can be no doubt but that O'Keefe enriched and deepened the local style of music by introducing a wider range of expression into it and by interpreting it in a creative and imaginative way. It was these attainments that set him apart as a great folk musician.

Most of his life was spent in the relative obscurity of the East Kerry hills. Amongst the hill people he was recognised as an outstanding fiddle player, but he was largely unknown to the country at large. This all began to change after 1946. That year he met Seamus Ennis.

Ennis was himself a traditional musician, a piper, and was at various times a collector of music for both B.B.C. radio and Radio Éireann. For some time he had been hearing from a friend of his named Denis Cronin, who originally came from Ballyvourney, about a great musician and fabulous character who lived down in Kerry in a wild place called Glountane.

Denis, a teacher, and his brother, Seán, a journalist, had a great interest in the local music and used to spend their weekends and holidays travelling about

the area in a car in which they carried musical instruments for the local musicians to play. They even recorded some of the music on an office dictaphone that Seán had.

During Easter 1946, Ennis went south to spend some days with Seán O'Sullivan, the folklorist, in O'Sullivan's native place, Tuosist, near Kenmare. While he was there, the Cronins made arrangements for a meeting with Pádraig. The venue selected was Jack Lyon's pub in Scartaglin, Pádraig's local.

So on a night to be remembered, Ennis, together with Seán O'Sullivan, Fr. Hurley, the parish priest of Tuosist, and Brother Denis, a teaching brother in Coláiste Iosagáin, Ballyvourney, set off for Lyons's pub in the village of Scartaglin. On the way they met, by arrangement, the two Cronins who were travelling in a separate car and both cars arrived together on the village street fronting the pub. As they emerged from the cars, they were greeted by the lively music of two fiddles, Pádraig's and Denis Murphy's, playing a reel, appropriately titled, in the light of the night that followed, *The Flowing Bowl*.

This is how Seamus Ennis described this first meeting: "The shop was a large one, going back from the door, and there was a large room on the left with a big open hearth and a roaring fire by the side of which Pádraig sat, complete with fiddle and two pints of stout on a mantleshelf above him. Well, he had a great welcome for us and wasn't a bit daunted by the presence of the clergy, who bore the brunt of many a wily jest before the night was out. Chairs and boxes were provided and the stout was dispensed".

A great night was had by all and it was the beginning of a long and lasting friendship between Pádraig and Seamus Ennis. They had, in fact, a good deal in common. They were both musicians and enjoyed good music, good drink, good company and good conversation. They were alike, too, in temperament and outlook. Both were easy-going, taking each day as it came with little thought for the future and they were no great respecters of rank or establishments.

The meeting with Ennis was also the beginning of national fame for Pádraig. In 1949, Ennis recorded him for Radio Éireann. Some time afterwards he was recorded by the B.B.C. and many times for Radio Éireann in the years that followed. With the broadcasting of his music, his name became known amongst followers of Irish music throughout the country. Representatives of recording companies came inviting him to make records. He certainly became the best-known denizen of the Scartaglin area and in local terms, a celebrity.

The attention he was getting and the fame he had gained were sources of puzzlement and wonder to some of his neighbours, especially some of the local farmers and teachers who had long regarded him as a ne'er-do-well and a blot on the teaching profession.

However, on the negative side, his new-found fame may have served to escalate his drinking habits. Certainly recording sessions and music sessions were traditionally accompanied and followed by a lot of drinking, and when he became famous, people, 'tourists' Pádraig used to call them, would come to Scartaglin to meet him and listen to him playing. Their usual way of showing their appreciation was to buy him drink and in his later years he often spent a day on the bar stool in Lyons's with an eye on the door for the 'tourists'.

One thing is certain: as he got older he drank more and more and became increasingly dependent on it. Fiddles, bicycles or anything of value that he had were sold to buy drink.

A marked deterioration began to manifest itself in the quality and technique of his playing. A roughness crept into the music and notes were slurred or missed. There is, for example, a noticeable drop in quality between the first and the last recordings of him in the R.T.E. sound archives.

There was a disimprovement in his personal appearance too. He was often unshaven and bleary-eyed. His dress became more shabby and dishevelled. When his friends or former pupils met him on the road, they passed him a coin out of pity.

As well as drinking heavily, he was eating very little and this added to his problems. Late one night in February 1963 O'Keefe returned home, having spent the night drinking in Lyons's bar in Scartaglin. It would seem that he was trying to open the gate leading to the house and fell over the dry stone wall onto the ground inside. It was a particularly cold night and he spent the night thrown on the ground. The following morning he was found by one of the neighbours, who called the doctor. The doctor had him taken to St. Catherine's Hospital in Tralee, where he was diagnosed as suffering from pneumonia. He died some time afterwards on February 22nd 1963. His passing was mourned by friends and neighbours, fellow musicians and followers of Irish music and his funeral to Kilmurry cemetery was one of the biggest ever seen in that part of the country.

He had, in his own words, gone to 'Fiddlers' Green, four or five miles below hell, where you'd want to be a fiddler before they'd let you in and where they have steel strings on the fiddle because the temperature is frightful entirely'.

Today he continues to be remembered not only as one of the greatest of the Sliabh Luachra musicians, but also a great character, wit and story teller. Indeed in the intervening years, his name has acquired a legendary status that owes much to his musical accomplishment, but also something to his philosophy and way of life.

Pádraig O'Keefe is seen as one other in a line of poets, artists and musicians who spurned conventional wisdom for a rakish, independent unapologetic life.