Padraig O'Keeffe: The Last Fiddle Master

by Pat Feeley

Padraig O'Keeffe, or Patrick O'Keeffe as he was called by his friends, or Pádraig O'Keeffe as he was known to followers of Irish folk music, was born on October 8th 1887 at Glountane, a remote mountainous district in East Kerry about half way between the Kerry town of Castleslade and the North Cork village of Ballydesmond, or Williamstown in 1904. He noted that the locality was a remote mountainous district in East Kerry about half way between the Kerry town of Castleslade and the North Cork village of Ballydesmond, or Williamstown.

The O'Callagheans were well known locally as folk musicians and singers. Margaret's mother was a fine singer and Margaret herself is remembered as a delicate 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'Keeffe 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's relationship with their neighbours 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 their children. In order to understand the family's relationship with their neighbours and the atmosphere in which the child O'Keeffe grew up, it is necessary to look at John O'Keeffe'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'Keeffe had made himself unpopular by undue severity to pupils and by exacting 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 Castleslade, telling him to warn O'Keeffe 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'Keeffe had beaten a pupil, Margaret Daly, on the head and neck, for which he was summoned and for which he had to pay costs, of his slapping another child, Ellie Reedy, on the hands and head, or beating John Lynch, aged 9, and of pulling his hair.

In December 1888, he was again summoned for beating one of the children, a girl named Lizzie Brosnan, but the case was settled by O'Keeffe 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'Keeffe 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'Keeffe, 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 their schools. He also 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, Arch-deacon Irwin, told the inspector that he would investigate any complaints of undue severity. He assured him that he was strongly objecting to 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, mountainy 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.

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 whose classes played outside the local 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 cousins, attending the local school, Ummeraboy National School, until he completed his primary education. All the evidence suggests that this was a happy period of his life. The O'Callaghas 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'Callaghs. He acknowledged his debt to the people and the place by naming a number of tunes after them - O'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 and went to work on his grandfather's farm, where he turned his back on it. His father died on April 30th 1915 and O'Keeffe 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 Padraig 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. Padraig was often unwell, especially in the mornings, for his nights were increasingly spent at home in dancing 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 Scoliard, 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 disagreed and he was adamantly opposed to any suggestion of marriage. With nothing coming of Padraig'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.

In this way, 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 Guiness'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
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 Sláibh 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 he did 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..."
Julia Murphy, to play for dances in Vaughan's Hall at Tralee and at other places, frequently invited to play for house parties and in the Labour Exchange in Tralee, but he never to hold and for the rest of his life his only source of income was the fiddle. True, he worked ever to work at any job, but it was what he used to refer to himself as Tom McCarthy's hackneyman, the local taxi, he came in and out of his life and worked at this until half nine. So he walked through the countryside and went into a public house and called for a drink but usually the only aspect of playing that he usually 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 practice and perfect them. Julia Clifford remarked: "he was always in a hurry. He used to just write the tune for me in my 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 sixpence down 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 Gneeveguilla in East Kerry. Paddy and Johnny Cronin, also from Gneeveguilla, 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 Padraig'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 or 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 unkept 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 stub 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 accus-
tomed over the years to facing into the
cold wind, the harsh, sleet, winds from
the mountains.

In Sliabh Luachra O'Keeffe is remem-
bered 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
his speech was rich in Irish words and
Hibernicisms. His face was soft and flabby
and very expressive and he usually
made a nasal snort. To his listeners this was an
annoyance and his kindliness and his jokes
were free of malice and vulgarity.

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,
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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 Gneeveguilla, and his wife Julia, (the former Julia Murphy) remember Pádraig’s lifelong companion: John: “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 mortal afraid of it but 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 way 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 for the dance 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 a maximum volume. He often got as many notes he inserted. O’Keeffe is often credited with popularising reels in 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 remarkable 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 on 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
Amongst the hill people he was recognized, he was working as a musician, a piper, and was at various times, a remarkable folk musician. He had a sense of humour and was always happy in the company of others. His music and his name became known amongst the Scartaglin 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 Ennis had.

During Easter 1946, Ennis went south to spend some days with Seán Ó'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 Iosagain, 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. They 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 Padraig sat, complete with fiddle and a galloping dance. He bowed a lot or two, admired his touch clean'.

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