

# THE O'ROURKE'S OF PHILADELPHIA

*Fr Ultan McGoochan*

ON 3330 G STREET in the Kensington area of Philadelphia City stands an impressive building, now used as a funeral parlour, that was once regarded as the grandest home in Kensington, previously known as the O'Rourke Mansion. The house was built by Michael O'Rourke in 1906/7 and he and his family lived there from that date until 1914. Michael O'Rourke was a successful building contractor and local politician. His story encapsulates the 'American Dream' and is a wonderful rags to riches Irish-American tale. And as the surname suggests Michael O'Rourke was a Leitrim man.

Michael O'Rourke was born in the Drumeela area of Carrigallen parish in September 1844, son of John O'Rourke and Mary Lynch. He was one of nine children—5 boys and 4 girls—all of whom emigrated to the United States. Michael entered the United States in 1865 travelling to the City of Philadelphia, where a number of family members including his brother James and his paternal uncle Patrick were already established. Patrick would go on to be elected as a local city councillor representing the 25th Ward from 1863-65. Michael was employed by his brother James and uncle Bernard in the building industry. Together they built houses and bought and sold property. When his brother succumbed to ill-health Michael took over the business and became hugely successful.

As his business interests prospered Michael entered city politics on the Democratic Party ticket. Like his uncle



■ **O'Rourke' Mansion, Philadelphia**

Patrick before him, Michael represented the 25th Ward and was elected in 1881 to the City Council. Unfortunately, he was not actually living in the constituency at the time of his election and he was forced to surrender his seat, but the

following February 1882, Michael was elected to the Upper Chamber of the City Council by a majority of more than 1000 votes.

Michael had been successful over the years in winning paving contracts from the City Council and inevitably, once he entered politics, the potential for a conflict of interests was carefully scrutinised by his political opponents. In April-May 1883 controversy broke out after Michael won a \$15,000 contract from the Gas Trust to dig ditches for gas mains and to pave over them. In December 1899 Michael won a massive contract for the paving of a major infrastructural development known as the Aramingo Project. At that



■ **Michael O'Rourke Memorial Cross on Gravestone at Drumeela, Carrigallen, Co Leitrim. Inset: Detail of inscription**



time Michael was employing 6442 men. The project ran over-time and over-budget and the City Council initially refused to pay the over-run, resulting in a lengthy legal case still unresolved at the time of Michael's death, that severely damaged his financial security. The City also went on to delay payment of a further \$725,000 for three other jobs.

Through the years Michael remained in touch with his native Ireland and Drumeela. He visited on three occasions, including 1874, 1877 when he visited, accompanied by his ailing brother James who died on the trip and was buried in Drumeela, and finally in 1882, when he travelled home for the last time to bring his widowed mother back to Philadelphia, to be re-united with her emigrant children.

In 1867 Michael married a girl from home and possibly a distant cousin Elizabeth O'Rourke from the townland of Drumeela. He and Elizabeth had 13 children, of whom only four survived to adulthood.

The building of the O'Rourke Mansion was a sign of how far the family had come in one life-time. Michael O'Rourke died on 1 March 1910 and was buried at St Anne's Cemetery in the City. In his will Michael left a number of generous legacies to Church and charitable organisations in the city of Philadelphia. The balance of his estate estimated to be \$200,000 was divided between his wife and surviving children. Michael did not forget Drumeela either and left a substantial sum of money for the renovation of the Chapel of his youth, St Mary's Drumeela. Elizabeth died on 20 December 1915 and was



■ Michael O'Rourke 1844-1910



■ Elizabeth O'Rourke and her children



■ The O'Rourke's Irish Cousins 2015

interred with her husband and the children that had pre-deceased them both.

A further link with the Drumeela and the O'Rourke's of Philadelphia is to be found in the graveyard at St Mary's Drumeela, where two imposing Celtic Crosses are to be found marking the graves of the parents of both Michael and Elizabeth O'Rourke. In recent decades the descendants of the O'Rourke's in Ireland and Philadelphia have renewed contact and visits have been exchanged, keeping the memory of one of the men that built America alive.

*More detailed information can be found at:*

<http://phillyhistory.blogspot.ie/2013/02/3330-g-streetthe-orourkecampbellguckin.html>  
[https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16094026W/Men\\_of\\_America](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16094026W/Men_of_America)

## Bog Rising

Kevin Patrick

Empires Rise and then they Fall upon this heathen earth. Unto each age a turning page. It's the same now with the Turf. That in its Happy Spring Time is laid out all in rows all parallel a-plenty in seeming deep repose.

Then up they hop! The Volunteers to be counted in this Rising; as to each other, the other leans as through them all, wind whistle-cleans them of the wet that holds them back and by the wind they turn brown-black. To harden up as soldiers must for Empires rise, before they fall and soldiers die on battlefields food for honour, so must all. And so they turn, then turn-about in stacks of footings small.

Bog Cotton flags, are furl-unfurled. Mid-Summer's Empire.

They Rule the World. As everyplace a man may look, to the corner of each eye shows the Turf has won. It's Empire now straight-stretches to the sky.

That sometimes blue and sometimes black does weather, not wear down these proud upstanding sentinels who've conquered Holy Ground. That blazes with a beauty as Heather, Moss, Bog-Flowers, all pay colour tribute to their Victors Turf-Topped Towers.

Then all at once, as light declines with the turning of the earth. The Empire falls. Quick Sudden. With the arrival of the Hearse. As body bagged in plastic sacks that once held fertiliser, Turf-Brothers all, are piled up high, seeming none the wiser. By Tractor to their doom they go. Purgatory in the Byre or in dry shed, to winter then to face the furnace fire as in the range, forever changed, devoured in flames afire.

As from The Bog they came like I to dust, they must return. When at the next Spring Rising these sons of earth will yearn to rise again Bog-Brothers all at the final April shower. When the wind is whistling, ill-at-ease and the Lily is in Flower.