A Weekend in Lovely Leitrim

Peter Gordon

In 1970, with the dark clouds of a diminishing market in South Leitrim due to emigration and lack of investment, it became apparent to me that prospects in Mohill were somewhere between dismal and disastrous. In the words of the great Dan McGarty (Packie's father): 'It was time to beat it while my boots were dry'.

■ *Olive & Peter Gordon at home in Castlebrock*

Following two interviews, I was lucky to be offered a post with a Dublin marketing company as an assistant to one of the executives. Despite the high position this man held, I found him to be quite sociable and helpful to me as I got to grips with the new and challenging work. In a lighter moment one day I told him about Mohill, Leitrim, its great people, its spectacular scenery, its music and the general rhythm of the place. Having heard my description, he could not wait to see it all for himself. The following Friday we set out for Lovely Leitrim. It so happened that there was a Fleadh Cheoil in Mohill that weekend with music in all of the pubs.

After tea, I thought it imperative to show my guest the places of interest in my home town—Mohill. We started at the Canon Donohoe Hall where all the top Showbands played in the 1960s—the Melody Aces, Johnny Flynn, Dermot O'Brien and the Savoy Swing Seven. Individual artistes who performed here were Bridie Gallagher, Margaret Barry and Ireland's greatest ballad singer, our own May Reynolds Malone. Anybody who has not heard May singing *The Shores of Lough Bran* has not heard ballad singing at its very best. Less talented bands played the hall also—the local Curate Fr Gill employed less well known bands in an effort to raise funds to clear the debts of the Parish. Fr Gill himself was a brilliant pianist and tenor, his speciality being Moore's Melodies. When people complained to him about the poor standard of the Bands he employed, he questioned the qualifications of the complainants saying, "They would not know the Tantum Ergo from the Boys of Wexford—the only music they ever heard was the mugs falling off the dresser!"

Situated in the grounds behind the hall are the tennis courts where a great club thrived with some outstanding players. The top two players were Jim Cahill and Cyril McGovern. Jim and Cyril, the doyens of style and elegance, were the Federer and Nadal of Ireland in the 1960s. Stories of their jousts with Isdale and Wood are the stuff of legend. Where Cashin's Garage operates was previously the boy's' National School, which I attended for six years under the legendary Master Kelly, playwright and top class teacher, who epitomised Goldsmith's village school master.

Another point of interest was the park which doubles as a Showgrounds. The annual Agricultural Show is a huge attraction. Apart from the cattle, horses etc there is a great interest in the Home Produce section. I think of Mrs. Peggy Bradshaw bringing in her entries - she is a one person Harvest Thanksgiving. The versatile Gabriel Moran is Head of Security for the show and does a

great interest in the Home Produce section. I think of Mrs. Peggy Bradshaw bringing in her entries - she is a one person Harvest Thanksgiving. The versatile Gabriel Moran is Head of Security for the show and does a brilliant job in an unobtrusive manner.

The late Chairman of the GAA club, Eamonn Duignan, usually started his speech at the AGM by saying "Gentlemen, the park is a disgrace". This was by way of urging us to improve the appearance of the park. Sadly, in the words of the poet Thomas Grey, "He was wasting his sweetness on the desert air" as the place has not improved in the past forty years. The visit to the Park reminded me of a South Leitrim Junior Final. As the brilliant footballers Pat Lynch, Liam Midge Guckian and Diamonds Booth trotted on to the field someone remarked that some of these players were very light. This prompted Johnny Duignan to let out a roar "Tog out heavier men Mohill!" In this park a famous championship schoolboys team was coached by Master Mark Keegan. A few of this team became top class stars at National Level. These included Packie McGarty and Eddie Rowley. One of Master Keegan's assistants who was nicknamed "Doll" exhorted Packie that when going on a solo run to go on his own and not to bring the rest of the team with him. 'Doll' told the team when leaving the dressing-room that when they were playing to think of the Three Cs - courage, commitment and determination!

I showed my guest the Ritz cinema - we used to save the four pennies to go to the matinees on Sundays to see Johnny McBrown, Snake Eye, Jeff Fronzy, Fuzzy Knight and Hopalong Cassidy. The cinema is now the Top Line Hardware and Builder Suppliers shop of the legendary builders - the Reynolds Brothers.

Another place of interest was the Hunt Memorial Hall - home of the Hunt Badminton Club. Many famous players were members here. Two names spring to mind - Joe Dugdale and Dick Lawrence. Joe was a wonderfully athletic player - no wonder that his two sons were brilliant Gaelic footballers for Mohill and Leitrim. Dick Lawrence is better known for his Trojan work for the GAA clubs, hurling and football. What is not generally known is that he was an outstanding badminton player. Dick got a rush of blood to the head one time and entered himself and myself into the Mullingar Open Badminton Championships - this would be the equivalent of an All Ireland Championship. We were unfortunate enough to be drawn against the eventual winners and we were duly 'wiped off the floor'. Were we disconsolate I hear you ask? Not a bit of it - we went to the local fish and chip shop for refreshments. We laughed out loud at the idea of two impostors from Mohill competing against two champions from Dublin.

I brought my guest to Paul Greenan's Emporium and Bar. The Bar was a mecca for the GAA fraternity as every night we assembled there to discuss and debate the news - the Government, the Ecumenical Council and the GAA. The discussion got 'hot and heavy' at times. As this debating is thirsty work, many pints and minerals were consumed. Dehydration had to be warded off at all costs. Paul, God rest him, was an entrepreneur before we knew the word existed. He was also an entertainer. He claimed, with some justification, that he was the only person in Leitrim who could sing like Joe Dolan. He could also do a decent impersonation of Des Kelly, Don Gibson and Pat Boone. Paul's top party piece was "Jerusalem". He emulated Joseph Locke, David Coyle and even Luciano Pavarotti himself. In a previous existence, Paul's premises was the Gaelic Hotel as well as a shop owned by Miss Maggie Ellis. Many weddings were held there. One day on my way home from school I heard some mellifluous singing. On checking who the brilliant singer was, I discovered it was Eamonn Duignan giving a rendition of "The Old Rustic Bridge by the Mill". Many years later Eamonn was the distinguished Chairman of the GAA club whilst I was the Secretary.

Beside the park is Hyde Terrace - a scheme of 36 houses. This Latin Quarter produced many fine musicians, singers and footballers of note - John Foley, Mikey Mannion, the Conboys, Sean Courtney, George Booth, Boola McCrann and Packie Starlet Foley.

Like every important city and town, Mohill has its river. The Rynn river flows gently along, so gently that it froze in February 1947.1 was then 10 years old, and along with my friends from Hyde Terrace, we spent March and April skating on the ice.

Where Peter Carroll's bar is located was the famous high class grocery and bar of my neighbour, the iconic Mikey Farrell. Mikey did not call the people who frequented his shop "Customers" as he wouldn't have considered that term classy. He called them "Clients". There is no truth in the rumour that my constant practicing of Acker Bilks "Stranger on the Shore" on the clarinet hastened his departure from Mohill.

After breakfast on Saturday morn-

■ *Olive & Peter Gordon before boarding the River Boat Natchez in New Orleans for a trip on the Mississippi. June 1996*

ing we headed for North Leitrim to commence our tour of the beauty spots - Dromahaire, Drumkeerin, Lough Allen, Glencar. Later to Carrick-on-Shannon, Dromod, Rooskey, Lough Rynn and Cloone. Cloone is a very interesting place - we know it locally as Ireland's Vatican City - home of the Pope families. Cloone could boast that they had two 'Popes' whilst the Vatican had only one. Cloone's two Popes were Charles and James, known respectively as the Black and Red Sonny. A customer told me one time, when I worked in Bradshaw's that it was in the Prophecies that a time would come when there would be no Pope in Cloone. He was right—that time has now come. Master Kelly was a great man for flowery prose. Passing a meadow he remarked "The aroma of the new mown hay was pleasing to the nostrils".

About 40 years ago a then very old lady Ellie Grant, called to Sonny Pope's shop and bar and enquired off Sonny if he had a booklet called "The Life of the Little Flower". Sonny, in a gruff manner retorted, "Go Away, I haven't the life of a dog". Sonny was not 'behind the door' in praising his merchandise. He had the following verse on his packets of tea:

If he want your tea both good and strong,
Go to Pope's, you won't be wrong,
The article's good, the price is fair
Whatever you want, be sure to go there

On Sunday morning we attended Mass in our local St Patrick's Church. Afterwards, I mentioned to my guest that I had served Mass as an altar boy here in my youth. On the 30th June 1952, along with my brother Cormac, I served the First Mass for my brother Tom. At this Mass he performed the ceremony for my sister Gretta's wedding. Another Mass I served was the wedding of local hotelier Jack Kelly and the then Miss Leitrim, Maureen Doherty. The best man was our local Doctor, John Duignan, who very kindly gave my fellow server Vincie Crossan and I the then very handsome tip of 5 shillings each. The sons of the Kellys, John and Ciaran, are the proprietors of the internationally acclaimed Landmark Hotel in Carrick-on-Shannon. Ciaran was a very clever Gaelic footballer but because he emigrated to train in hotel management he did not realise his full potential as an All Star.

After lunch we attended the County Final, Aughavas versus Gortletteragh, in Carrick. My guest enquired which team I was supporting. I explained that I was neutral but that I knew one of the Aughavas centre field players, Terry Blessing, and that he was a very fine fellow. Little did I know then that within two years I would be married to his beautiful sister, Olive. The match was a draw until the final minute when another of my brothers-in-law, Tony Colreavy, scored the winning point for Gorletteragh.

After the match we returned to Mohill for the tea and then headed for Dublin. As we travelled out the road, my guest expressed amazement at all he had witnessed over the weekend. He mentioned that he had travelled half the world, but had never met such marvellous people, or seen such spectacular scenery, and indeed wondered why we would leave such a beautiful place.

I explained that we had to leave Leitrim for opportunity and not scenery. I knew what my guest meant as my neighbour Dermot Connellan said in paraphrasing Samuel Johnson (1709-84) "When you are tired of Leitrim, you are tired of life".

For years afterwards, my weekend guest referred to his visit to Leitrim. When I reflected on the impact of a two-day visit I realised that with some good marketing, instead of being Ireland's best kept secret, Leitrim could be exposed for what it really is - the Eighth Wonder of the World.

A Church Mouse

Mike Joe Mahon

SHE WAS only seven years old at the time. A bright, cheerful child, with a winning smile, large blue eyes, and a great sense of right and wrong.

Her mother used to say she was 'dawney', she was bronchial at the time, a complaint that was to disappear completely in later years.

One of my earliest memories of her is dressed in a bright red coat and cap. This was manufactured for her from the contents of some of the famous American parcels that came regularly to our house around that time. Her mother was, as they used to say "handy with the needle". They never mentioned the scissors which was more important really.

These parcels would generally contain a few longed for ladies hats, these would be remodeled into a completely new shape, pushing the rim up where it had been down, or turning it down where it was up. An artificial rose or some other decoration was sewn on then, sometimes on the very top or maybe on one side, depending on the overall shape of the original hat. Then came the actual fitting on of this work of art in front of the mirror. It would get much gentle basting and shaping.

At this point in its construction, any part could be front, back, or side. Finally, one exact point would be declared front, and then she would say "all it needs now is to be trimmed with a particular coloured ribbon and worn partly to the side". Its maiden voyage would be on the following Sunday to second Mass. She would be accompanied by the child dressed in her new red outfit. After Mass, Mary Moran, and Kate Noone, her friends, used to comment on these creations and say she was a wonderful Milliner and the child was the spitting image of 'Little Red Riding Hood'.

Herself, her brother, her father and mother lived on a small farm just outside the town. With the rest of the children in the area, she attended Kiltoghert National School, there were five National Schools in the Parish at that time. Yet, Mass, Christmas and Easter ceremonies were always fulfilled in St Mary's Church in the town.

In these days, no one ever, when visiting the town would think of leaving it without paying a visit to the Church to say a few prayers. We were always instructed from an early age to make this visit first thing, other business could come after that. Sometimes it might be necessary to make a quick dash past the Church to the Post Office, to have a letter in the post before 4.00 p.m. in order to have it delivered next day.

We always made sure to bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross when passing St. Mary's, or indeed any Catholic Church. People who lived, or worked in the town would always bless themselves, even if they passed the Church several times during the day. If you were to stand for one whole day now outside the Church, you could count on one hand the number of people who bless themselves when passing, even children are not trained or asked to do so.

Another custom of our childhood, the saying of The Angelus. Morning, Noon, and Evening Prayer seem to have gone into oblivion. In the summer evenings of that period, we could easily hear the Angelus Bells ring out from Annaduff, Drumsna, and Carrick Churches. The noise of traffic on all roads has now drowned out the sound of the Bells. Some evenings if the breeze was right, the Angelus Bell from Cootehall and Drumshanbo could be heard. Mae Foley told me one time that after her house in Ballinwing was hit by lighting, that any one who lived within earshot of the Drumshanbo Bell would never be killed by lighting. Drumshanbo held the only Chapel of Perpetual Adoration that I had ever heard of at that time.

When the Angelus Bell rang out at twelve and six, everyone stopped whatever they were doing at the time and silently said The Angelus. If they were standing, they always genuflected when they came to 'And The Word Was Made Flesh'.

I remember an old man named Carthy in Carrick bog surrounded by three grown-up sons and a daughter, all on their knees reciting The Angelus every evening during the turf saving season.

I often wonder, do many people say The Angelus to day, or do they know even how to say it! When we were in Primary School, we were taught The Angelus and as a test had to recite it in pairs. My memory was never great, and I always had difficulty in knowing in what order the Antiphons came i.e. The Angel of The Lord declared unto Mary', 'Behold the Handmaid of the Lord', 'And the Word was made Flesh', 'Pray for us O Holy Mother of God'. I

had no trouble at all with the Responses, and so long as the other guy was saddled with the Antiphons, my Responses were spot on, full marks. I never told any of my class that I really did not know how to say The Angelus from beginning to end. I still have trouble with it to this very day.

Sometimes I watch the television version of The Angelus on RTE, it portrays men, women, and children at work and play, when The Angelus Bell rings out its first three chimes, they stop whatever they are doing for a moment, then continue on again, even the little girl hops her ball before you could say The Angel of The Lord'.

Talking about prayers, one of the great rituals in every family was The Rosary. This was an absolute 'must' with the whole family on bended knees, their arms resting on the seat of the chair they were previously sitting on.

On one occasion in our house, we were all in the prayer position. We had a live in help at the time for the farm. We always referred to him as Old Guckian. He was not that old at all, but to us children he appeared very old and hard to get on with - which he really was not.

He was quite religious and took a serious part in our Rosary and the trimmings. Some of the young men and girls thought The Rosary to be a bit of a drag. They always had to be present for it, seven nights a week, no matter where they were going later on in the night. Generally The Rosary was recited at a time that would suit the family, often after the evening meal and before the ramblers or card players came in on their 'Cheile'. If the younger people of the household wanted to go to a country house dance, or any other social event, they were now free to go. The Rosary was over.

If some one arrived early before The Rosary was finished, they too, got down on their knees and joined in the family Rosary. One early visitor commented afterwards, he did not mind the Rosary at all, but the trimmings was a 'right hoor'.

For the most part one would be kneeling on a hard uncovered concrete floor, or rnaybe even flags. The trimmings would include prayers to every known Saint, and to some whom we now know are not Saints at all, they got knocked off their pedestals a few years ago.

These would be earnest prayers to The Almighty for protection against all types of diseases and plagues, for the health and well being of sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, and neighbours in America and pagan England. Included might be a prayer to bring them all safely back home. I don't know if all the people who, by then, were earning good money in America or pagan England wanted to be brought home. Home to what ? I will leave that unanswered for now.

More of the trimming included prayers for fine weather for the turf and hay saving, and of course for the cows and other animals which were often named. The loss of a cow from disease or drowning could be felt for years. The cow herds were much smaller at that time, and they were all named and referred to by that name. One occasion we were all deeply engrossed in The Rosary. Old Guckian, on his knees had positioned himself as usual with his nose up against a press and his arm on the seat of the chair. We all had our backs to the fire, the kitchen was in darkness except for whatever light the fire on the open hearth gave out.

Our big cat Tom Pat' was sitting on one side staring into it and purring like an engine ideling. Suddenly, the door of the press was slammed shut, the Rosary came to a sudden end, and the mother jumped up and lit the lamp.
It would appear that a mouse had either been going into the press, or was coming out when Tom Pat charged and accidentally slammed the door shut. Old Guckian had nearly jumped out of his skin with the fright he got and said " didn't he know he should not have done that:". Tom Pat resumed his seat by the fire and I thought he was a bit sheepish looking. I am sure he knew he had made a fool of himself. Incidentally, Tom Pat was always a thief and a rogue that could not be trusted for one minute, and in the end he died a premature and very violent death in the prime of his life.

On the eve of Christmas her father died, a very young man at thirty-nine. The year was 1936. You could say Ireland was still in the dark ages. Extreme poverty everywhere, no electricity, no running water, no indoor toilets or sewerage of any kind. Not even a chemical toilet outside. One summer was so bad the turf was not saved, trying to cut timber with a handsaw was an impossible task. The Bushman Saw was not invented for years afterwards. It was necessary to have some kind of timber to boost the Arigna coal that was been burned at that time. If bottle gas were available, it would be like a magic wand to the people of the countryside. It did not become available until years after the War finished in 1945. The Second World War had started in 1939. Whatever little luxuries this country enjoyed previous to that, the War put paid to them. It was a hard year for her, 1936, she did not get any toys or presents. All the energy and cash her mother could muster up went towards the burial of her young husband, and putting the bare necessities of life on the kitchen table. On top of that there were a few cows and calves to be looked after. Generally, there were a few pigs, plus chickens, and a batch of turkeys, a

very important source of ready cash in those hard times.

Christmas 1937 and the family had survived a whole year without the breadwinner. There was no Christmas lighting on the streets of Carrick-on-Shannon, no big outside Christmas trees, or Santa Claus, and very little presents.

A special treat was to be allowed to go alone to visit the Crib in the Parish Church. This was set up inside the Altar Rails in St. Joseph's Chapel. It was a box-like structure with a picture of Jerusalem taking up the back wall, a star-like light on the top, at least six inches of straw in which the figures were placed, and illuminated by a bluish light giving the whole thing a rather weird effect.

On her way to the Church she stopped to admire Toolan's little man, in his drapery shop window. This little figure which kept on bowing his little head at the onlookers was surely a fore runner of all the wonderful moving figures we see in to-day's big stores. Wonderful and all as this little moving man was, she had greater things on her mind, she had bigger fish to fry, and she could tell no one about it until it had come to pass. So she moved away from the noisy crowd at the window and made her way up the two flights of steps and into St. Mary's Church.

We had all learned to ride the high Nellie bicycles of the day. Even though we could not sit on the saddle and reach the pedals at the same time, we all managed to ride the bicycle by just standing on the pedals.

One day before Christmas, a cousin of her neighbour arrived to visit, she was riding a small-framed bicycle with small wheels on it. She was allowed to ride around the road, sitting on a little saddle and pedaling at the same time. She never witnessed such joy before. Oh - how she longed for such a bicycle. She said she would give her right arm for one like it.

Her teachers Mrs Keane and Mrs Hunt were forever talking about the goodness of God and his Divine Mother Mary, and that anyone who prayed long enough and hard enough to them, and to the Infant Jesus had their request granted. She felt in her heart and soul that very soon now she would be riding out of town on a little bicycle just like the one Mary Josephine had. Both Mrs Hunt and Mrs Keane said that miracles happened every day, well almost every day, well sometimes.

Quickly she made her way to St. Joseph's Altar. The Church was in semi darkness. The candelabra with its dozen or so small candles in front of St. Mary's Altar threw strange shadows all around. The only other light was the strange bluish light in the Crib itself. There was not a single soul in the Church bar herself, and it was so still and quiet you could hear a pin fall.

She dropped to her knees on the cold marble Altar step outside the Crib door, where she could clearly see all the figures in the Crib. The cow and the ass were both lying one on either side of the Baby Jesus in a small manger. His mother Mary and St. Joseph were also on each side but slightly to the back. There were a few shepherds holding baby lambs. The Three Wise Men were more to the front. She could barely see one because he was well over on the left.

And so her prayers began. Silently she told Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus how much she wanted a small bicycle. She explained the type of one Mary Josephine had, she wanted one exactly like that only newer. Mary Josephine had her bicycle for more that a year, as a matter of fact since last Christmas. Mrs Hunt said nothing was impossible to Mary, and no one's prayers ever went unanswered.

She was just starting a new round of prayers and requests when suddenly, she thought she was stuck to the Altar rails. There, she heard it again, only much more distinctly this time, the straw was moving somewhere within the Crib. The Baby was still lying on his back so it must be Mary or Joseph. Yes, it would be Mary or Joseph who would hand here out the bicycle. At this point she said afterwards "the clothes were stuck to her". A short while later she knew that neither of them were moving but the straw made noise over to the left, and now all was becoming much clearer. The bicycle would come from King Melchior bearing the gold. She moved her position in order to have a better view into the left hand side of the Crib. Suddenly a well fed mouse clambered up onto the six-inch high threshold at the doorway. He gave one look at her and jumped back and disappeared under the straw.

She arose from her kneeling position and walked slowly back up the aisle. At the door she turned and looked back, from here she could see neither the Baby or the animals, but she could clearly see Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, and two of the Wise Men. She said her knees were buckling under her as she closed the door and made her way down the steps. The light was beginning to fail as she made her way past Toolans shop window. Some people still lingered outside admiring "Toolans Little Man". He held no great wonder for her now. Disappointed and sad, she walked out the Jamestown road.

I think I can hear her in my mind's eyes as she uttered one of her mother's regular phrases—"the curse o' God on that frigging mouse"