COMING FROM… GOING TO…

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■ Ní neart go cur le chéile—The lads prepare

■ County colours—the author home from home

HE GETS ON The London Underground train at White City, heading west. I have him spotted at once - a dark suit, shiny with age, a patterned shirt from the 90s without a tie, and, despite the heat of the day, a v-necked woollen pullover. He is red faced, with dark, greying hair round the sides of his bald head; he would be around seventy, I suppose.

He sits next to me, and I can feel him sneaking glances.

So it is no surprise after a couple of stops when he says:

"Is that a Leitrim shirt?"

"It is, so."

"I thought it was. Do ye know what station we get off at - for the match? I've been here before, but only with other people, so I'm not sure of the way, like."

"It's Ruislip West," I tell him. "Where are ye from?"

"Ballinamore. What about you?"

When I tell him my family are from Drumkeerin, he asks about a man who used to keep a shop there, and adds:

"I'd say he'd be dead now though?"

I know the name but I've never met the man.

"I'd say so, yeah."

Strangely, it's the same question about the same man the late John McGahern asked me when I met him in Edinburgh some time ago.

Leitrim is a small enough place.

At the next stop, a gang of five lads get on and sit opposite us. Their ages range from mid thirties to one youngster, who looks hardly twenty. They are loud in the telling of their stories—maybe they already have drink taken, or maybe it's the anticipation of an afternoon session, in the sunshine, with a bit of football thrown in.

By their accents they're from a spread of counties: Tipp, Cork, Kerry, and maybe Clare.

The train is above ground now, and they point out places where they had digs when they first came over, the craic they had, and the mistakes they made. The older ones are careful to mention work, and children, to reflect their late found sense of responsibility. Only the young lad is silent. He takes in all the stories, and has a face on him that's wanting to be somewhere else, somewhere where he feels comfortable, more confident, less apprehensive of what the future will bring, a place that feels familiar.

Looking round the train, you can spot them—the grandads bringing the young ones, the middle aged couple, the family with small children, the young lads—all drawn to the London GAA grounds—to see Leitrim, or London, some football, or friends they know will be there.

And at the ground, an Irish oasis in a mundane west London suburb, the crowd is huge. A new stand opening today, an air of celebration and expectation. Drinks being passed, tales being told, well remembered faces being spotted. The news exchanged, the hopes expressed, the fears hidden at the bottom of the glass.

Ye could almost be at home.

There's a lot of people here hoping that one day they'll go back to the place they came from, and many, like me, who are homesick for a place in which they have never lived. The problem with emigration is that it is seldom limited to one generation. You could fly a banner over the London GAA grounds this Sunday afternoon that says: "We are all emigrants." The decisions of the grandfathers and fathers and mothers are visited upon the grandchildren and later generations. Once emigration is in your family, it's always there—whether you care to acknowledge it or not—some do acknowledge, and some resolutely refuse, preferring the solace of forgetfulness to the permanent ache of exile.

Emigration begets sentimentality, much of it on the painful side of maudlin. I'd say many reading these words will already have a playlist in their heads: Dolores Keane and "My grandfather's Emigrant Eyes", "The Wolfe Tones' "My Heart is in Ireland", Christy with "Missing you" and Larry, always Larry, with "Lovely Leitrim".

But the soft songs and the keening laments are no more than a coping strategy; there's much to be said for singing the blues.

When the game starts, the mood in the stand changes. This is serious. These are our lads on the field, playing far from home under an Irish flag. The crowd feels the connection. There's a fella who started out with our club, another lad who went to school with your brother. The teacher from the Vocational school is defending well, and your pal once went out with the goalkeeper's sister.

But it's more than that.

For emigrants, this is the county in action; this has to represent it all: the walks down the lane, the pints in the bar, the chats in the shop, the discussions at the garage, the help in the field, and the journey to the Mart. What is everyday life for those still at home is contained, for the exile, in this seventy minutes of football - the panel in green and gold standing for the thirty thousand who live in Leitrim, and the hundreds of thousands more who wish they did, pretend they do, and act as if they are.

No pressure then, lads!

And it's more than that again.

Sure, the sentimentality catches up with you in your lowest moments, the absence of loved ones, and familiar places and faces, would make the strongest character weak at times, but emigration runs far deeper than a passing mood or a half remembered song. For

■ The Leitrim Faithful—awaiting throw in.

generations, it will define who you are.

He is the one whose great grandfather was so poor that he had to travel half way round the world to find survival; people know that one's father was so driven to succeed that he sold the farm and set up a business in New York, worked all the hours, till he became a rich and respected member of the community. She, over there, has a grandmother who left a hill farm and became a society beauty in Brooklyn; and he can just about remember his oldest brother who got into the States illegally and ended up as an NYPD detective who was shot down on the corner of McLean Avenue and 1st St, a long way from Jimmy's of Dromod—which was advertised on the front of the old jersey he wore to bed every night.

And people will ask you about them, and, whether voiced or not, the next question is always: "So, what does that make you?"

Have you justified their decision to emigrate? Are ye better off than you would have been had they stayed at home? Are ye glad they left? Or frustrated and displaced by the last generation or so of your history? Do you blame them, or are you thankful? Do you try to avoid thinking about that—or are you genuinely oblivious to your origins?

There are no right answers, of course. Nothing to give you closure, to stop you from being descended from an emigrant. And when ignorant bigots, in whatever country, give out about people who "come to our country and take our jobs"—do you nod in mute agreement, or do you identify with that man in the sepia picture in a drawer of your desk, the woman carefully posed for a formal picture in Fulton St in 1890s Brooklyn, the lad you sat next to in school who is selling automobiles on a New Jersey strip mall?

Who are you—and what are you?

You can put away the flags and the songs and the GAA tops and the DVDs. Identity is not really about any of that—it is about who you are inside, how you feel, and what you feel. Part of that you choose, but, surely, some of it is in your DNA. Was your determination forged in a field on Corry Mountain by a man who believed driving a tram in Brooklyn would be better than watching the sun set on Lough Allan? Is your restlessness a gift from a grandmother who believed she could be something other than a farmer's wife if she became a nanny in Boston?

Or is your calm acceptance of the life you've been given, the love of the lanes around Drumkeerin, the awe at the changing majesty of Sliabh an Iarrain, season by season, day by day, inherited from parents who went to Chicago or Birmingham or Glasgow and came to believe that their homeplace was best suited to them after all. When they decided that all the hard work at home was a fair exchange for regaining the comfort of continuity and history, they came back, and gave you the gift of the family fields and the community's long, long memory. In their leaving, they had found out what they possessed.

Is there somewhere in your house a fading picture of a ship out of Derry called the Furnessia or the Californian? Are you old enough to remember the blue aerogramme letter on the mantelpiece by the picture of the Sacred Heart - the sign that said your Uncle Frank had been in touch? Do you remember the parents booking a call to Australia a week in advance, and their frustration when the connection failed? Or does your long distance communication come via Skype with a confusing, hand-held, iPad tour of the new digs?

Emigration is about distance in mind and in body, in heart and soul. Emigration is Leitrim and Leitrim is emigration. It is part of who we are, who we have been, and who we will always be. It makes our county open to other places in a quite unique way. Not many homes in Leitrim are ignorant of places far away, not many lanes on the hillside are innocent of the feet of strangers or the searching of emigrant generations. If we have Lithuanian grocery stores and Polish tradesmen, we are only returning the favours of centuries

Emigration is the beckoning hand of invitation on a quayside far away, and it's the mud and daub of the top field clinging to your boots. It is the thought that there might be something better, fighting with the fear that you already have everything you need or can achieve.

It is a scenario for bravado, and it's an encouragement to weep; it's an escape from family, and it's an introduction to loneliness. An emigrant re-defines himself, those who stay consolidate their being.

There is a lot of drink around the field at Ruislip, many confident voices telling jokes in a tone which is just a little too determined; the Instagram pictures of smiling youth have replaced the cheerfully exaggerated letters of the 19th century. Emigration can bring you success, it can bring you despair, and it can even bring you home.

A Leitrim victory means the majority of the crowd leave happily; another week at work, or a flight home, can be faced with some optimism and satisfaction. Those of us in the diaspora, and a fair few who live in the county, are looking forward to next May, when the sons and daughters of Leitrim will walk the streets of New York as they have over two centuries. The road to Gaelic Park, like the road to Ruislip, will be paved with thoughts and hopes and dreams and memories. Those who left and those who stayed will celebrate with those whose lives have been shaped by generations long gone.

When you emigrate, you are coming from, and going to —but the length of your journey, and the certainty of your final destination, will never be clear.

Like Leitrim's waterfalls, as emigrants, we find the best way down the mountain, sometimes we sparkle and flow freely in the bright sunlight of choices well made, and other times we run slow and sluggish, making hard work of the new ground we have found - but our journey continues, and Leitrim is still our piece of the rock.

It always will be.