

LIFE AND DEATH IN GAEGLOM TOWNLAND

Jack Deacy

THE MCGOWAN HOUSE is the first one you meet after you start your steep climb up Gaeglom townland road which takes you three or four miles up to the bog. There was always a great welcome at the McGowan house for friends or strangers. The wonderful Babbie McGowan, the woman of the house, would have you in for a cup of tea or maybe an egg or some cheese or a half one of Irish whiskey. When I first entered the McGowan house as a boy in June of 1953 it was full of family: Pat McGowan, the man of the house, and the children John James, Mary, Paddy, Margaret, Lizzie and Teresa. At night it was frequented by ramblers like Long Pat Judge who would tell stories around the fire. A friendly house of welcome.

If you stop at the house today and knock on the door there is no one left to answer. Paddy McGowan, one of the last people to farm in a once thriving community, one of the last of the local hill bachelors and the son who came home from working in England to care for his mother, died in October last of a brain tumour. He was 72 years old.

I met him first that summer of 1953 when we were both nine years old and we played together and became friends. We have been friends ever since. I saw him often on my many trips to Ireland, and when I lived there as a journalist for a few years in the early 1970s, and I spent time with him every spring for the past 15 years. This past spring, I wasn't able to make the trip and by that time Paddy was being treated for the tumour that would eventually kill him.

Paddy was born on March 12, 1944 in Gaeglom, three months before I was born in Brooklyn, New York. His mother Babbie and my mother, Mary McGowan Deacy, were best friends growing up in Gaeglom.



■ Jack Deacy, left, with his cousin Andy McGowan, centre and his lifelong friend Paddy McGowan, right, in Gaeglom townland in Creevelea. August 1957

My mother left for New York when she was 18 in the early 1920s. Babbie stayed on and married Pat McGowan and raised six children.

My mother's people were the Pat Phildy McGowans from up the mountain, to distinguish them from the Pat Paddy McGowans at the bottom of it. To this day I don't know if we were related. What mattered was the friendship and loyalty that bound and still binds the two McGowan families.

I first saw Gaeglom in late June of 1953 when my mother and father decided that my sister Theresa, brother Joe and I should spend a summer in Ireland staying in the house where my mother was born, and also spending time with my father's people in Bohola in County Mayo. My mother was with us, and my father Martin stayed at home in Brooklyn to work and look after the house.

We had never known any of our grandparents and my mother wanted us to

meet her mother who was in her eighties and the last surviving grandparent. That summer turned out to be a magical summer for us, three kids from Brooklyn free to roam the rolling hills around Creevelea, saving the hay, terrorizing the chickens, playing with friends Paddy McGowan and James and Frank Sweeney, watching a cow calve, bringing turf from the bog, hunting with the Trotter brothers, rambling from house to house, drinking minerals, listening to music, fishing in the river, and spending time with our sweet granny, who called us "a grá".

And then there was our uncle Pat Phildy McGowan, farmer, musician, recitationist, storyteller, "the Bard of Creevelea", one of the great characters of the community and the funniest man we had ever laid eyes on.

My mother left her home in Leitrim for New York to join her brother John and Phil. Her other brothers, Dan, Michael and Anthony, left later for England. They left, like millions of their countrymen, to get work and start a new life. Pat Phildy stayed at home to run the farm and look after his mother.

The story of the McGowans at the bottom of the road followed a similar pattern. Babbie and Pat McGowan had raised six children, and one by one, saw them leave for England to get work. First John James went, then Mary, Paddy, Margaret and Lizzie. The exception was the youngest, Teresa, who married a Cork farmer and moved south.

In England Paddy found work building the motorways, digging potatoes in Lincolnshire and working as a gardener for an Irish landscaper. All the McGowans settled in and around Altringham, a suburb of Manchester where so many people from Creevelea and Drumkeeran had set

up new homes. Paddy stayed with his Aunt Delia Feeney and became part of the Feeney family there. His father Pat McGowan died in 1968 and for a while, Babbie ran the farm on her own. But then a later hip replacement made it impossible for her to manage alone. So Paddy decided that he would return home and look after her and run the family farm. His sister Lizzie also returned home to Creevelea where she married Andy McPartlan. Paddy and Lizzie looked after their mother until her death in 2001.

Babbie McGowan was the kindest, warmest and most generous of women. Her temperament and personality drew her naturally to others and she would do anything for you. Paddy liked being home and he liked farming, first raising Charolais cattle and selling their calves in the marts of Manorhamilton and Dowra. But the land was better suited for sheep and Paddy raised Suffolks and Cheviots and had wonderful sheepdogs.

Paddy McGowan was proud of his flock and looked after them well. He worked hard and liked nothing better than to sit down with a friend and have a chat and a laugh. He had a fine singing voice which I discovered only a few years ago when he sang a few of my Uncle Paddy's humorous songs about the local place. And he loved to watch the Gaelic football and hurling matches on television with friends like Jimmy Sweeney and James Doherty.

As the years moved on, emigration and death had taken its toll on Gaeglom and Creevelea. Old families that we had remembered from the time when we were boys were long gone. Houses where rambler once danced — round the house and mind the dresser! — were now abandoned. The house my mother was born in and where we met our granny and laughed at stories told by Uncle Pat Phildy was still standing. But sheep lived there now. The forestry had moved down the mountain and now there was a forest where families once saved the hay.

Every spring I visited Creevelea. Paddy

and I always had a few days to sit and have talks and catch up. "Gaeglom is a very lonely place now Jackie," he told me the last time I visited him. I asked him then if he could remember the names of the men, women and families who once called Gaeglom and the surrounding townlands home. I wanted him to take us both back to when we were nine years old when everything was possible and we would live forever.

Paddy thought for a few minutes and then spoke:

"Well, here in Gaeglom in this house there were eight of us McGowans. Then you had Pat and Rose McParland, the Mick John Tommys and the Doherty, McMorrow and McGahey families. And most of the families I'm talking about had three to seven children in the house. But you had a good number of bachelors too who never married. Now going up Gaeglom road you had the Bartley Sweeneys and above them were your people, the Pat Phildy McGowans and just below them the Gilhooleys and far above them near the bog were the McKennas. Over in Tullintowel you had Hugh the Peeler Gallagher, Mickey Dan McNiff, Sean Dan McNiff, the Paddy

■ Paddy McGowan 1944 - 2016



Fochie Gallaghers, the Sweeneys, Charlie Trauer and his family, Stephen and Mick Gallagher and Paddy Gallagher.

Plenty of Gallaghers around these parts. You had the Nabby Gallaghers, Mary who drove a car and her brother Tommy a great fiddle player. And over in Altravra townland you had so many people and families and youngsters. There was Pat Feeney, John McCauley, Bartley Gilrain, The McGees, and Pat and Mae McGee and the Grogans and above them Charlie Elliot. Charlie Elliot was one of the few people who owned a car but for some reason he never learned to drive in reverse. Further up the mountain were the Trotters, the Pat Flynns, Mick Sweeney, Frank McNamara and Pat Dan McAuley. And around you had the Feeneys, my mother was a Feeney, and there was Biddy Gleason, long Pat Judge, Terry McQueeney who could read the tea leaves, and the Horans and the Coyles, Mister and Missus Coyle, both school teachers, who lived in a fine two story house opposite the church. They owned the shop and the post office, run for years by their daughter, the beautiful Peggy Coyle who got married late to the long, lanky and handsome Seamus Horan, the best fiddler in the area. Your Uncle Pat Phildy played with Seamus and the flute player Packie Duignan in the Lough Allen Trio, and they played at McCrann's Public House every Saturday night.

And there were so many more I can't recall now. You saw them everywhere. In the fields. On the road. In the shop. At Mass. In school. At dances. Cutting turf on the bog. At the creamery. In the pub. At the fair day. The hills were alive with them. Good neighbors all. All of them gone now but for a very few. I miss them. The place is lonely without them."

Now Paddy McGowan is gone and is among his old friends and mates again. And the home place and the townlands grow lonelier still.

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