

FAIRY TALE OF NEW YORK

Sean McPartlin

EMIGRATION HAS many causes and many effects. Its hand is on the shoulder of those who leave and those who stay, and its breath is felt on the faces of many who are far distant in time and place.

Boarding a plane in Edinburgh last Thursday to go to New York to see Leitrim play at Gaelic Park felt like some kind of homage to those before us who had followed up an American wake with a long and troubled journey to Derry, Belfast, Cobh or Dublin with the USA on their minds.

Our worries are, of course, of a different order. We are going for a short time and by choice; ESTA forms, passports and customs controls are to the forefront of our minds, and we have a clear idea of what will greet us at the other end. Thanks to pre-immigration at Dublin Airport, we were through arrivals, on to the Airtrain and via subway to our Manhattan hotel in less time than it would have taken the huddled masses to find space on a battered bench in the Hall of Ellis Island. For all that, the voices and dreams of those who went before were bound to accompany us. As Barney Breen said, there wasn't a man on the panel who didn't have a relation, neighbour, or friend already in New York.

In so many ways, this was a special trip.

There were those who travelled to meet long missed relatives and neighbours; those who went for the craic, and those who never escaped the lure of the McLean Avenue hostelrys. All went to support George and Barney's lads. It's a journey five years or more in the making, an approximation, as Colin Regan wrote elsewhere, of the Muslims' need to attend the Haj at least once in their life. There are certainly more Leitrim folk in New York than there are in Leitrim, however you look at it, and a good part of the county were on the move across the Atlantic for the May weekend.

You could sense the excitement at Dublin airport; Leitrim colours were given the conspiratorial wink: "Will we win then?" "Will we last till the game?"

In our green and gold, we travelled from different points to different destinations. Four of my family left from Drumkeerin for Brooklyn at the end of the nineteenth century. My grandfather headed back across the Atlantic after five years or so, to Edinburgh, our point of departure on

ADJUDICATOR'S NOTE: Excellent account of a trip to New York to see Leitrim play at Gaelic Park with thoughts on the nature of county bonds, and emigration in previous times and today. Very well written, highly enjoyable piece.

Thursday morning, the rest were lost in the genealogical morass of New York immigration. For all I knew, we may find ourselves sitting next to unknown relatives in Gaelic Park; emigration doesn't always leave clear trails.

So my son and I headed for Manhattan rather than Yonkers, and while many of our fellow travellers revelled with familiar faces in 'Little Leitrim', we hit the tourist spots, and, of course, Brooklyn.

We walked from Brooklyn Heights across the bridge and along the shores of the river from Pier 17 all the way to the Battery and Castle Clinton, where my antecedents would have entered America. Crossing the river like that, you are in no doubt that, though it has changed mightily, it still dominates New York and Manhattan. There were ferries of every description, scuttling to and fro like water borne ants; helicopters rose and swooped like mechanical birds of prey, and, in the distance, an iconic reminder of the days when transatlantic liners transferred cargoes of European despair to American hope, the giant bulk of Cunard's Queen Mary 2.

As you do, we ate a hot dog and drank a Coke at Battery Park, surrounded by a hundred languages, ahead



▼ The Parade in Gaelic Park



of us the over-familiarity of the Statue of Liberty, the functional buildings of Ellis Island, the empty shoreline once smothered by ocean going ships.

Hope, fear, dreams and disappointments can be tasted in the salt on your lips where the Hudson meets the East River. When you think of emigration as statistics, it's staggering, when you think of the individual stories it's overwhelming.

"Come day, go day, wish in me heart it was Sunday" was never truer—for the supporters and the players I'd guess.

While we had been sightseeing, the players had been fulfilling their many roles as ambassadors. We had arrived in New York at midday and gone straight to our hotel; the players had arrived later in the day and been greeted by members of the local Shannon Gaels club. Then, en route to their New Jersey hotel, they had stopped by the club's grounds to meet officials and the youngsters of the wide ranging youth scheme, with over 19 teams and 300 youngsters.

It was meant to be a brief courtesy stop, a cup of tea and a biscuit, but, as is the Leitrim way, it developed into far more, and soon the players, in their casual gear and all, were trading passes with the kids, signing autographs, posing for photos. It was one of many moments in the States when the importance of the GAA, the commitment of the players, and pride in what we have in Leitrim, was on show. As Shannon Gaels later wrote in the *Leitrim Observer*:

I don't know if the players fully understand the impact their visit has had on these youngsters, as indeed they were a very unique and humble bunch, but rest assured that that there are autographed O'Neill's balls and club jerseys bearing



■ Amhrán na bhFiann—Ní neart go cur le chéile



■ On the attack



■ Eye on the ball

Leitrim names in many hundreds of houses here in Queens and to these children they are more valuable than and medal or cup they have won. The team had another

function on the Friday night and during that day and the following trained on Gaelic Park's astroturf to acclimatize. Sunday eventually arrived, and, with it,



■ Sean McPartlin with Enda Williams

morning Mass in St Patrick's Cathedral. As is so often the case in Irish America, we found strange echoes of home. We waited on the steps on Fifth Avenue as the congregation from the 8 o'clock service exited the vast building. Smart business suits, prosperous faces, Irish family names, all gathered outside as they do in Ireland, for their weekly meeting and exchange of news. Here, stocks and shares and construction contracts, rather than silage or stags in Carrick were the more likely contents of chat, but there was an almost familiar tone to the gaggle of conversation. Meanwhile, as we entered the Cathedral, a pipe band outside played the Lourdes hymn.

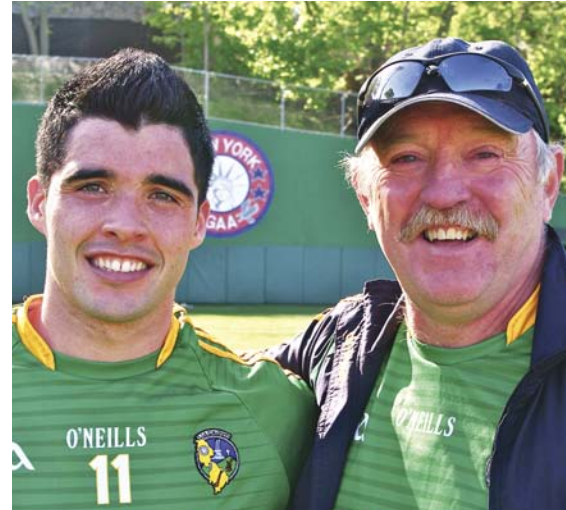
St Pat's can be overwhelming—a monument to those Irish who forged emigrant success, a place of refuge for those who didn't. Causing the first lump in the throat, on what I knew would be a day of emotion, we spotted, dotted around the church, the green and gold of Leitrim shirts. In Edinburgh, I never come across Leitrim colours, seeing them here so far from home was strangely moving. However, we had relatives to meet. One of my uncles had left Edinburgh to emigrate to New York in 1929, no doubt enthused by his dad's tales of Brooklyn; his granddaughter and her son would be meeting

us at Penn Station for the subway ride north to Gaelic Park. They are 3rd and 4th generation Leitrim, and excited as any of us. Jon thinks he's actually going to Ireland; we tell him he's not far wrong!

Our normal trip to 'home' games in pairc Sean involves aircraft, a hire car, and five hours or so of travel, so the news that we would need 'replacement buses' for part of our subway journey was no great horror—although the uncertainty caused a mild panic. We know New York—but we've never been north of Central Park—and there's a game to go to.

As we get off the subway, a couple of lads sidle up to us while we search for the right bus: "Is that a Leitrim shirt? Where are we going?"

Once on the bus, we chat. It turns out they're from Dromod. In a nod to the old county shirt, I contemplate asking how Jimmy is, but we're too busy looking out the windows, working out the time it will take in heavy traffic. We arrive in plenty of time, more and more green and gold appearing, the closer we get to Gaelic Park. One of the Dromod lads turns to us: "We have a couple of extra tickets—ye can have them." We thank them profusely. Mary and Jon are stunned. I try to explain that Leitrim folk are the most



■ Sean McPartlin with Emlyn Mulligan

generous and hospitable in the world. I hope she knows I'm not exaggerating.

Once in the ground, the familiar match-day atmosphere takes over—albeit with the smell of barbecues and a bright, hot sun. Last year at this time we were doused in the rain of London's Ruislip, but New York has unfurled its brightest banners.

The Leitrim folk have turned out in huge numbers—tales are being swapped everywhere, many about the last few days, some going back decades. Jon's eyes get wider—he knows he has Armenian and Welsh in his family roots, now he's getting a taste of his Irish tradition. He and his mum have dressed in green for the occasion, but his eyes pick out the Stars and Stripes on the subway train parked in a siding overlooking the ground. There will be more than a few folk wondering where their loyalties lie this afternoon.

It's a truncated parade—there are only supporters on two sides of the ground, but, at least in my imagination, the green of Leitrim has never shone brighter. I get through to the second last line of Amhrán na bhFiann before that lump in my throat defeats me again. I can't even begin to explain how proud I am of Leitrim, the supporters, and our team.

The game is one sided; the New York lads

are brave, but George and Barney have prepared well, and the team is professional, as fluent and free flowing as they need to be. Captain Marvel nets three goals and a shed full of points, Tomas Beirne, and Wayne McKeon do well and any fears of the wrong result are very soon removed. I'm disappointed that our Drumkeerin lad, Colm Clarke, and my Twitter pal, Enda Williams, aren't in the starting line up, but you can't really fault the Leitrim performance.

Without the tension we often feel in close run games in Carrick, there is a different atmosphere but it's marvelous to watch the team anywhere - and New York in the sun is an awesome place!

At the end of the game Mary and Jon are GAA converts and Jon has the programme to take into school the next day. I explain that, at home, the crowd goes on to the pitch to meet the players after the game, reflecting that these lads are family, neighbours, workmates and known to all. It's no different here, and we go on to the Astro turf, a little nervously; these guys don't actually know us - we may be from Leitrim, but we live in Edinburgh, we don't want to be gatecrashing family gatherings here.

Shouldn't have worried.

For those of us who live outside of Ireland, Twitter has become like the town's main street. We can't bump into members of the panel down the street, but we can online. I pester Emlyn, Enda and Gavin Reynolds something terrible on Twitter - and they always respond, always take the craic. It's a real treat for an overseas supporter - even one who's old enough to know better. However, it is a kind of artificial relationship, through a computer. Anyways, I pluck up courage and approach Enda for a photo: "Hi Sean," he says....I'm

over the moon (like a school kid, as Mary laughs to my son, Patrick, spotting my delight) It's great when heroes live up to your hopes. I move on to Emlyn ('Emlyn Hughes' as the announcer has been calling him all afternoon!).

"How ye doin, Sean?"

This feels unreal. I realise at my age I should know better, I should at least act cool, but I can't help being delighted at their response. My son takes more pictures; I'm so excited I forget to take pictures of him with the lads. He understands; he knows what it means to me.

It's like a cameo of the difference between GAA and other sports - ye couldn't imagine this at the Emirates or Old Trafford.

The band has started up and some serious partying will take place - but we need to get back downtown and Mary and Jon have to head home to Long Island.

As we walk back to the bus stop, one of the railway workers smiles:

"We're still here! Was it a good game? Enjoy your evening!"

Back in 8th Avenue a young guy passes, stops us and says: "Did Leitrim win?"

This is what GAA can do - convert the Big Apple into a small village!

There's one more surprise.

Checking in at JFK a couple of days later, we realize we are on the same flight as the team. I can see Patrick is worried this will drive me into the nether regions of supporterdom, but we take our lead from the team, who are quiet, chatting together in twos and threes, and recovering from a busy week. There's a few nods and smiles, and that's enough. I've seen quite a few sports teams in airports, and they don't always cover themselves with glory, but the Leitrim lads continue to do the county



■ Never too young!

and the country proud. I'm glad I have the polo shirt on; who wouldn't want to be associated with these fellahs?

As it happens, on the plane, we are surrounded by team members, and you can't help being impressed by these guys. Though I'm a romantic about the GAA, I do know it has its faults, but the demeanour of these lads is a real tribute to all they stand for.

The flight back from the States is pretty short. You can't really sleep, but you can still dream. I wonder what my grandfather and his family before him, for whom Amerikay was over the raging foam, would think of this relatively short and smooth transition from New York to Dublin. I wonder what he would think of his grandson and great grandson remaining so proud of the land he left behind so many years ago. I think of all who made the journey one way and never returned, the disappeared of the Famine, the Irish who took on the USA and didn't make it; the empty hearths and the stones lying tumbled in fields where once families lived and worked and died.

The Irish will tell you they don't have much to be proud of just now, but they



■ Patrick McPartlin looking for an angle

have. Economies come and go, the cash fuelled ambitions of the shallow are sooner or later revealed as fleeting and pointless, but it's the character that makes the people—the character we saw on and off the field in New York, amongst those lads on the Airbus, the character which sustains everyday existence in Connacht, Ulster, Leinster and Munster—that character is a unique tribute to those who came before us, to those who left, and those who stayed—for, ultimately, emigration doesn't drive us apart, it ties us together.

So I hurtled across the Atlantic, surrounded by people from Mohill, the Manor, Drumkeerin, Dromahair, Aughawillan, Cloone, Eslin, Aughnasheelin—as well as Longford and Kildare! It was called the tourist class cabin, but for me it was my comfort zone.

We landed into a 'soft' Dublin dawn; Collinstown has a habit of bringing you

back down to earth in more ways than one. We hadn't wanted to bother the team during the flight, but George Dugdale is standing next to me as we leave the aircraft. It's a good opportunity to thank him and all the backroom staff for the sheer hard work and effort that goes into producing a county team and organising a trip like this. He looks a little surprised: maybe he doesn't get a lot of thanks.

The team and officials headed off for the Clarion Hotel for breakfast before taking the coach back up the N4; Patrick and I waited for the Edinburgh flight back to our real lives.

The trip of a lifetime exceeded all our expectations. You could say it was a *Fairy Tale of New York*.

Except it really happened!

Up Leitrim!

SNIPPET

ART TUITION

Noreen Gaffney is a Mohill-based artist and art tutor. She has taken part in numerous exhibitions throughout Leitrim for many years. Noreen firmly believes we all need an outlet for our creativity and painting is most certainly a skill that can be learned and with some practice progress can be rapid. As an Art Tutor Noreen works in a variety of community contexts throughout Leitrim and Roscommon with people of all ages, Noreen is pictured here with the Mohill Carer's Support Art Group.

Back: Noreen Gaffney (Tutor), Lisa Rogan, Eileen Charles, Helen Toolan, Mary Cunningham, Nevy McVeigh, Margaret Elomari, Marie Browne. Front: Margaret Flynn, Anne Guilfoyle, Liz Rogan & Rose Keegan.

Left: The Open Flower (original)

Far Left—Van Goghs: The Cafe Terrace on the place du forum (copy)



You can follow Noreen's programme on facebook 'Noreen Gaffney School of Art' or email: noreengaffney@yahoo.ie

