

A Fireside Poet

Nancy Bohan-McKeown

GUY BEINER, a lecturer of modern history in Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel in his book *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* says that the most popular ninety-eight songs in the Leitrim-Longford area were attributed to a folk poet named Patrick Higgins of Cloncoose, County Leitrim who was locally esteemed as "a great poet".

He sees "Tom Gilheaney" as a ballad of flowing poetic structure and simple rhymes and he writes of Higgins' commendable feat of memory as the poem ran to 222 lines.

It appeared to have been the most well known song in English about the year of the French.

Pat 'the poet' Higgins was born in 1832 in Cloncoose townland in the parish of Gortletteragh. In his own words he tells us:

"I scarcely reached my 13th year, when my poetical talent did appear"

This was in 1845 when the Famine was just beginning to take hold. Pat went on to become a very important fireside poet.

The poems, rhymes and ballads that he recited at those fireside gatherings dealt with such diverse subjects as Irish history, biblical studies, the art of advertising, English literature, horse racing and practical studies and the poet even acted as a match-maker and reviewer.

My grandfather John Bohan of Fearglass North was an attentive listener to this free flowing poetic verse by the hearthstones. He had the foresight to commit Higgins' compositions to paper, thus saving for posterity this literary treasure.



Thankfully those valuable writings were safely handed down through our family to the present day and presently I am the custodian of what became known as the *'Bohan Manuscripts'*.

In 2010, while browsing through the pages of the *Leitrim Observer* as I holidayed in New York, I discovered to my surprise that the people of the poet's home townland of Cloncoose and their friends and neighbours, who had long admired and enjoyed his writings had come together and formed the *'Poet Higgins Society'*, with a view to publishing his many compositions and erecting a memorial to him.

I was overjoyed as it was my lifelong wish to have his poems and rhymes put in print and opened up to a wider audience. On my return to Leitrim, I joined as a member of the society and was delighted to share the *'Bohan Manuscripts'* with the group.

Working on the project was a labour of love for me.

It came to fruition in 2011 with the publishing of a collection of his writings titled: *'Patrick Higgins (1832- 1902): poet of Leitrim-Longford Borderlands'*, which was edited by my cousin, Dr Kathleen Duffy. A fine monument was erected to the Poet's memory at the top of the Poet's Brae, just across the road

■ Nancy and Louise McKeown with the Higgins Clan in New York in 2014—
Back: Erin, Cara, Louise, Danielle, Maureen and Nancy.
Front: Bridget, Kristy, Rainy, Nancy McKeown, Ellie and Suzie.

from where he lived in Cloncoose.

During the research period, Chairman of the *'Poet Higgins Society'* Cllr Martin Kenny made contact with the poet's descendents in New York and spoke with them of the society's plans. The family wasn't really aware of how important a literary figure their great grandfather had been in 19th century Ireland.

Pat's wife Ann died in 1894 leaving her husband to rear their three little children. By the time Pat himself died in 1902 his son Cormac was only 13 years of age while his daughters Rose Ann and Mary were only 15 and 10 respectively. Some time after their father's death they emigrated to America.

Some of the Higgins family from New York made their first trip to Ireland and to their ancestral homeplace in Cloncoose in 2012.

In April 2014 while visiting my daughter Louise, her husband Michael and my two grandsons, Daniel and Darragh in New York I met up the Poet Higgins' six great grand daughters and a great grand-

The Key

Maura Williamson, for my daughter Lauren. 9th August 2014

Come walk in my tiny size 2 shoes.
With my bright blue eyes,
there are things I see and you don't.
There are things I hear, that ring different in my ears than yours.
There are things in that big mad, bad, bright world, I meet and greet far different than to you.

Why talk about school when it is holiday time.
There are things you say just to "make chat"
sometimes "your just chat"
don't cut it with me!
Because...well...you really don't fit those size 2 shoes.

Why worry about tomorrow?
Today is here.
Each moment of each day is so precious to me.

Music, now that is my real world.
That is the language that speaks to my heart.
"The beautiful Mess", "Could be the weather", "Driving in my car",
"The Dixy Chicks", "Wagon Wheel"
"Come take my hand and walk with me"
Those songs, the words they write,
So speak to me.

Why try to fit a round peg into a square hole?
Back when I was tiny,
and struggled to find words,
my mammy, she sat on the floor with me,
taught me that a round peg fits in a round hole,
a square peg fits in a square hole.

Why live life by a big time clock?
Did I tell you
I know how to read the time,
but refuse to let it dictate the pace of life to me?
There they go again, packing as much into one day as possible.
Ask them this day next week what they did,
who they met,
where they were.
They have forgotten,
Forgotten indeed.

Live in the moment that is my simple key.
One day at a time,
that is ME.
You too have a key like me.
It's inside you.
Watch me, listen to me.
Open a new door,
before it is too late.
Leave behind the old ways,
they no longer fit,
no longer do it for you.
You need to start living.
Remember now, it is not too late.
First, you must follow in my size two shoes,
Let them be your guide.
They are mine, my guide,

ME.



■ Ellie Higgins-Dunn with her husband Bobby at her great grandfather's monument at Cloncoose in 2012.

son and their families. We had a wonderful time and during my stay with them, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that one of his great granddaughters Maureen Higgins-Laut had followed in his poetic footsteps. Here is a poem Maureen penned about the Higgins' family tale:

The Poet's Story

Maureen Higgins-Laut

Pat knew when quite young in his poems he could tell
Stories and memories which make us know him well.
He wrote them down with lines filled with rhyme
And that they are still being told is a tale of time.
Alas, a sad life with the passing of dear Ann
Three small children to raise alone was his plan.
He died when he was old and grey
And his children knew they couldn't stay.
Why they left we may never know
But off to a new country they did go.
The poet's son and two daughters were eager to start
Their new lives in America, though they would be apart.
The girls went to Boston, Cormac a big city
Losing touch with each other a terrible pity.
His two sons never knew their kin were close by
Years later when asked they were stunned, and thought why?
Their father not one to speak about his past
The longing for family would last and last.
Cornelius and Mal would both grow old
And Mal's children would have to eventually be told
That back in Ireland where it all began
Their Great Grandfather "The Poet" was a well remembered man.