

THE MEETING PLACE

Fifty years ago, and long before, the men walked to Keshcarrigan for a drink on Sunday afternoons. Each had a shilling in his pocket, enough to get drunk on, if he so felt. They argued all the way home, all three miles. At Castlefore they had to go their different ways, so they started the fight there. Mrs. McGlynn settled them one summer evening. She lay in wait for them with a pounder; she was a big woman. "You have the whole road to fight on," she said, as she laid into them, "you'll not fight at Castlefore." They didn't. Castlefore was one of hundreds of traditional meeting places, it was sacred ground; people talked there, played there, they didn't fight there. There was a place for that, too.

The ideal meeting place was, of course, a crossroads, better if there was a river and the parapet of a bridge; a big tree or two was useful shelter from a shower and provided dry sitting and a prop for the back. The meeting places were used mainly in the summer, in winter men gathered round the hearth of the ceildhe houses. Men only and growing boys. At the crossroads the boy sort of received the toga of manhood. If you were from the area and didn't come to the cross at times you were considered a snob or an oddity.

Sometimes they danced at the meeting places, but that was by special arrangement. They had to organise the music, maybe get a dancing board, bring on the girls.

They played games, skittles, pitch-and-toss, a football match. Sometimes they had road races or slow bicycle races, or threw stones at a target. There was always a bonfire on St. John's Eve, it was sometimes the signal for the opening of the 'season'.

But the heart of the meeting place was the conversation, the distribution and collection of news. The bog could be a lonely place during the day, or the potato field, or the meadow. A man could not go to bed without



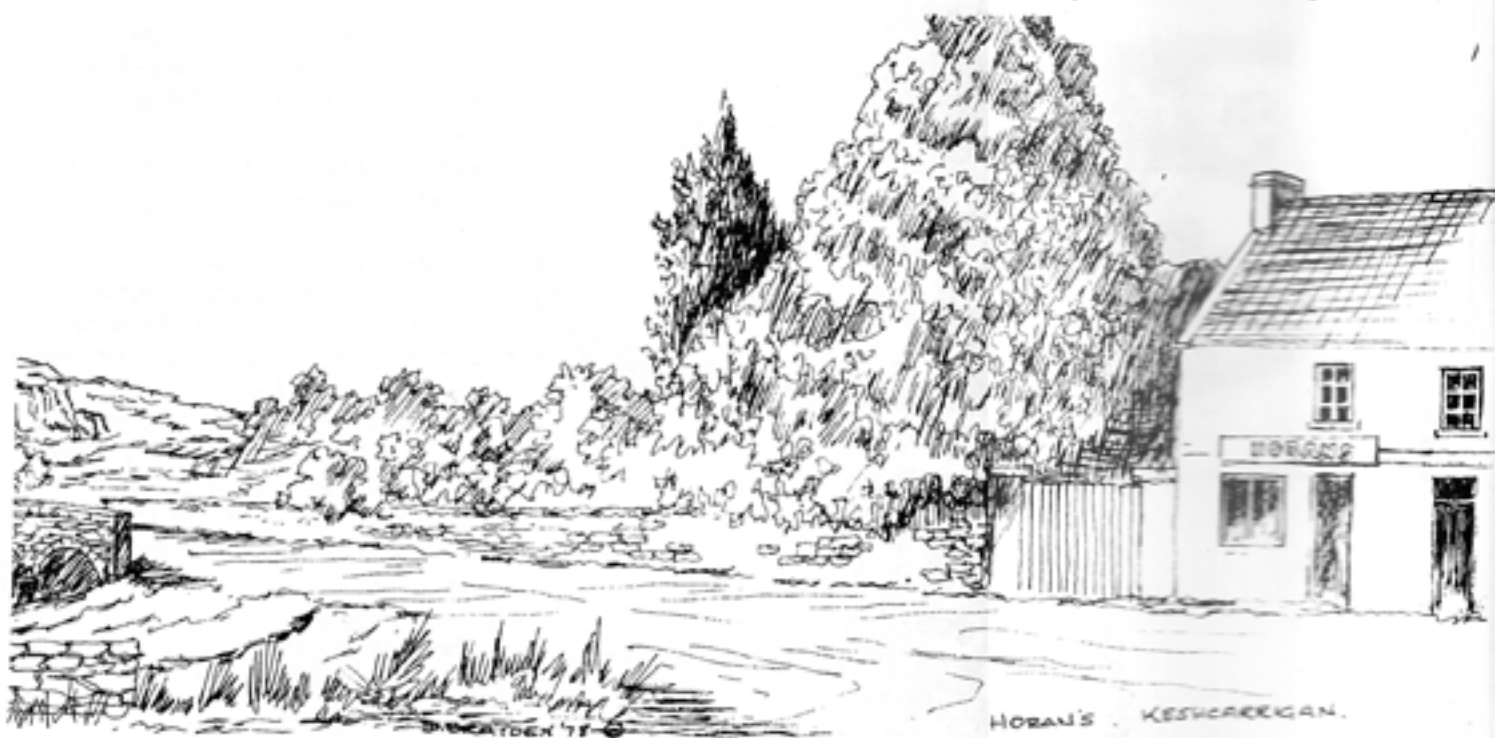
finding out what was going on in the great world, or, more important, how he stood with the crops in relation to his neighbours. At the crossroads people passed by. Greetings were exchanged. All eyes turned to follow the passer by. There was silence until he/she was out of earshot, then the whole company turned back to interpret the event. A man could go home from the cross at night to his wife carrying a 'bushel' of news, and it seasoned with a whiff of scandal.

My own meeting place was the Mill Avenue at Garadice, under

the big beech tree which had been planted by the landlord. It was in the 1940s, during the War, during the want. There was a crowd there every summer night; the great emigration had not yet begun. The abiding memory is of the 'crack' and the yarns. Michael Gallagher came cycling down towards the crowd one evening, and passed by. "Where are you off to?" Christy Keegan shouted after him. "I'm going down here to turn," was the answer. They were all 'quick'. The stories could have been straight out of sagas. "When I was work-

ing in the forge," Dermot Gallagher announced, "I could hang the red-hot horseshoe on my bare arm and dangle it there until it cooled." "I don't doubt you at all," replied John McHugh, "when I was a young man I could take the boiling kettle off the crook, turn the spout into my mouth, and drink my fill." A man did not call another a liar; instead he matched like with like.

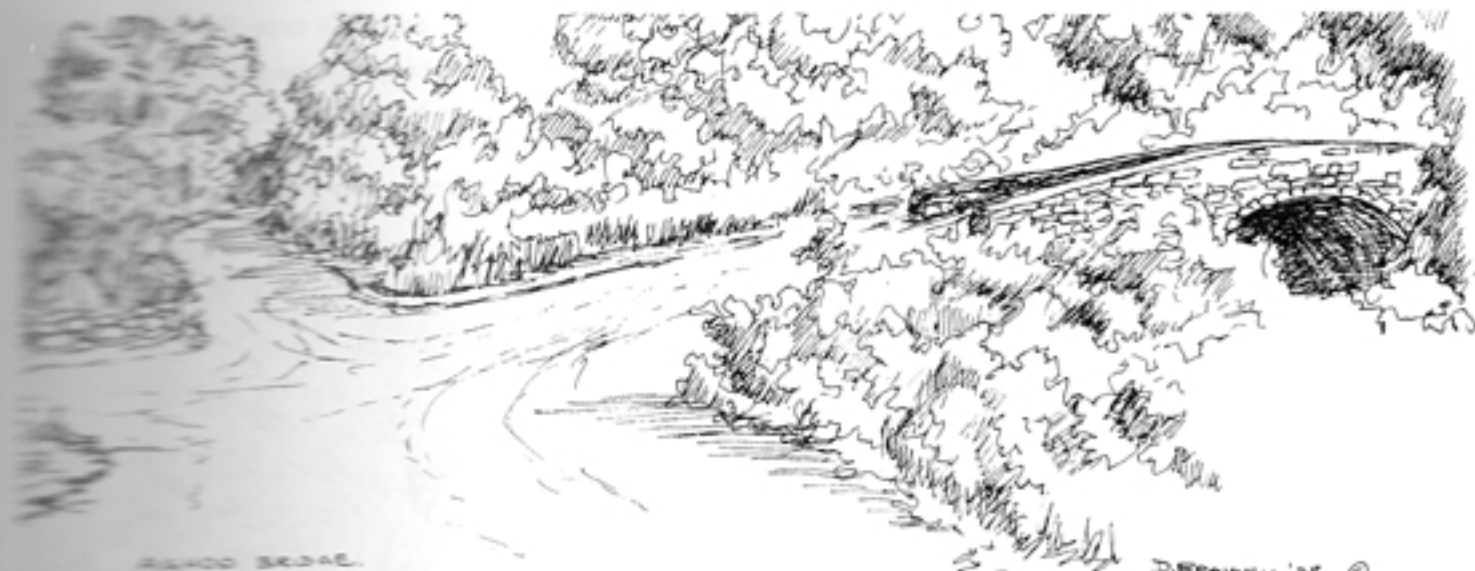
The crossroads are empty now. People meet in other places, or don't meet at all. They tell me Christy Keegan still comes to the Mill Avenue on good evenings. Often he is the only one there.



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