

Ceannabo Ceili — Caint agus Craic

by Tommy Moran

In Paul O'Grady's the only price you paid for a ceili was to be caught for the Rosary. In Lent fifteen decades, Rosary, litany, trimmings and a poem that ended all its verses with "Oh Sacred Heart of Jesus I place my trust in thee." But there was crack at the Rosary too, for in reply to Tower of Ivory....House of Gold....Ark of the Covenant....Frank Beggan would mutter "Make tay for us", "Make tay for us". Make tea Mrs. O'Grady did. For everyone. The back room had seemed already full with Paul and his wife Mollie, with Tony, Pat, Claire, Charlie Paul, Mary and Philomena. But there was always room for you, for the lodgers from the railway, for anyone that dropped in. It was one of those houses that really had welcome on the mat, a great ceili-ing house.

The ceili-ing house seems to have died at the birth of television. Nowadays we are muzzled for Coronation Street, Dallas or Crossroads. A few grunts during the ads. and it's back to J.R. We have almost forgotten how to talk, and our young people have never got a chance to learn. Their conversations are all one-sided with Blue Peter, Jackanory, The Muppets and the Multicoloured Swap Shop. We're gradually turning into a nation of zombies.

Jimmy Scales was pre-television. He never heard of the Nilfisk 80, never used instant coffee, Persil Automatic, double glazing, puff pastry, Old Spice or Babysoft toilet tissues. He was of an age when people could be entertained without television, without video-recorders, four channel radios or eight track tapes. Jimmy was no TV sponger; he wasn't worried about that knock on the door—the only time his door was knocked was on Hallowe'en night. In Jimmy's, like so many of the houses of his day, entertainment was a pot-pourri of local wit. And there was no cover charge.

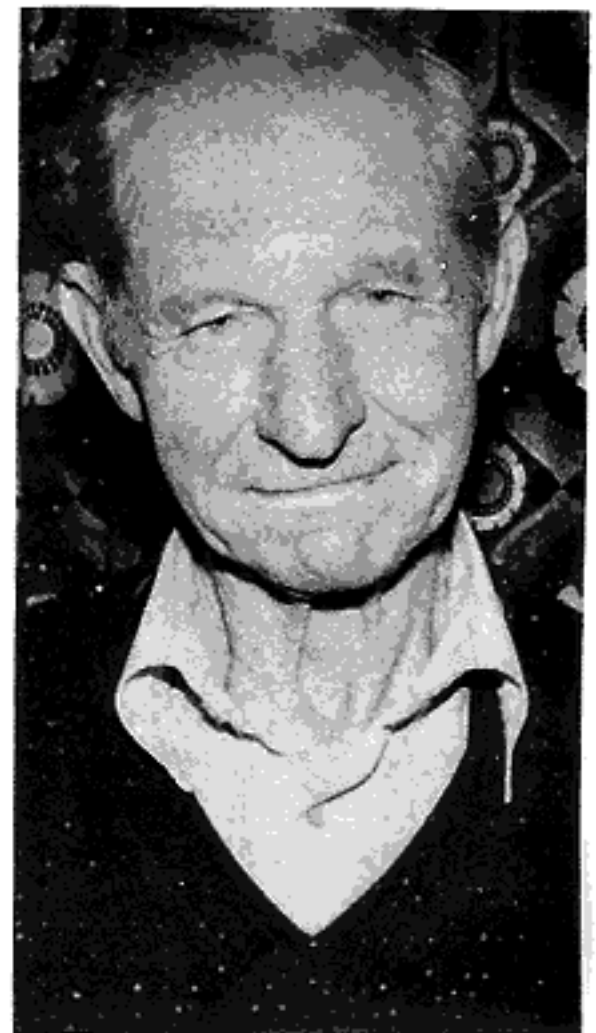
He could barely see across the toe caps of his boots, but when you lifted the latch in Scales' you were greeted with "Goodnight ould son". It mattered little who you were, you were welcome. And you were in for a good night's crack with Jimmy Canning, Roddy Maher, Jimmy and Pat Leddy, Michael, Berney and P. J. McPartland, Tommy, Teddy and Sean Clyne, Patsy and Sean Canning, Yallie and Mick Clyne, Paddy Prior, Eamonn Canning and Jim O'Connell, who was considered horrid well off because he had a bicycle. Packie Mulligan, who delighted in the repartee, kept the crack going by slipping downtown for gallons of porter to keep the whistles wet.

Everyone present was a "seanchai" in his own right as they vied with each other in telling most unbelievable stories, but it was Scales himself who regaled the listeners with hair raising tales of his exploits in Scotland. Exploits with stingy landladies who tried to steal his penny herrings and Indian herbballists who almost burned the skin off his back with cures for the rheumatics. Scales had thought of a plan of recognising his own herrings in the lodgings — he pulled their eyes out when he bought them. "Come here you blind hoor you" he'd shout and grab his herring off the landlady's pan.

Scales made tea for his visitors—it was so strong you could smell it coming up Lahard—and he boiled eggs



*Eamonn Canning
Musical Maestro of Country House
"Joins" — and still entertaining the
people of Ballinamore.*



*Tommy McGoldrick
Half sets and eating competitions in
Tommy Leddy's . . .*



BALLINAMORE

RAILWAY

STATION

over the hearth fire in a tin can. Lie would outdo lie until around midnight when Jimmy would shout "Do I look bad? What in hell are you all sitting up with me for?" and he'd lift Odie and clear the house. Odie was his favourite blackthorn stick. Next morning Jimmy was out like a lark, dressed in breeches and leggings, with whip in hand, off to drive Mulligan's bread-van. Jimmy was a forerunner to the Samaritans for he often provided warmth and shelter for the night to the many vagrants that passed through Ballinamore. His brother Johnny came occasionally from Scotland. He had a ferocious temper—'twas said he bit the ear off Bullets Dolan after a row in Ceannabo.

"Take my advice and you'll
have luck
And take your goat to Cooney's
buck,
For he is fed on hay and oats
And he's the boy who'll tip the
goats".

Apart from his seemingly renowned stud farm, Jamsie Cooney had a first class shoemaking business, and also a great house for a ceili. The yarns were spun here by Joe, Johnny and Paddy Moffatt, by Martin and Tommy Cooney and by Patent Walsh. Walsh's jennet died one evening, but it wasn't a total loss. The boys skinned him, hijacked a pair of horns out of Greenan's slaughterhouse, put the lot in a bag and sold it as a cow's hide to

Mick Creamer for three-and-six-pence. At that time three-and-six bought enough porter to last the night.

Sometimes the crowd would gather in Francie Dick's. Dick didn't believe in furniture so you sat on a round sandstone. There was no chimney and the smoke belched through the house and out the door. Roddy Maher had no chimney either and when he'd see the priest coming he'd fling a few wet sods on the fire. The priest couldn't stand the smoke.

Ann Doonan's in Ceannabo was the Las Vegas of Ballinamore. Twentyfive was played from six o'clock in the evenings, partners, a halfpenny a man. There was sign language for the Ace of Hearts, or the Five or Knave of trumps. You reneged at your own peril. The last game was a rubber, tuppence a man all in. One night Billy Keegan's dog Beck tried to kill Ann's pet pig, the table was tossed and the tuppences went flying through the kitchen. There were no losers that night, only Billy's dog whose backside smarted for a week. Billy had the ace and had just been ready to rob.

Out in Ardrum, the cards were played in Tommy Leddy's cottage. And in Tommy's, at least once a week, you were sure of an all night dance with Eamonn Canning, Hughie Dooner and Packie and James Moran providing the music—they were in

demand for "joins" all over the country. As they played, Packie Keegan's clogs knocked sparks out of the stone flags for the half sets. The regulars in Leddy's included the McGoldricks from Tullyoscar—Tommy, Felix and Jim; Tommy "Sapper" Prior, Charlie McHugh, Martin Canning, Pat Leddy and Josephine Maxwell who worked in George Knott's. The floor was sprinkled and it was round the house and mind the dresser.

It was Pat Leddy who organised an eating competition there one night between Packie Keegan, Felix McGoldrick, Tommy Prior and Tommy Leddy. Down on the range went a saucepan of soup, a roast of beef and a bucket of spuds. Packie had nearly burst a gut by the time he realised the others weren't eating at all, but were throwing their spuds into a bucket under the table. He was known to all as Mockler, and he once entered the world of politics. He was no Ronald Reagan but his pre-election speech was the epitome of honesty—"Don't cod yourselves; I'm going to feather my own nest first, and if there's anything left, ye can have it."

The joins were more common on the mountain, in Jimmy Dolan's of Ardrum or Tommy Prior's of Killaneen. All going to the join chipped in to ensure a good roast of beef and a half-barrel—or barrel—of porter. No one

was in a hurry home, for no one punched a time clock next morning.

In Packie Moran's you had a ceili with a difference. You picked notes on Packie's accordion, you marvelled at his artistry in painting the hats for Mummings Day and you fiddled with the many gadgets in his watch repair shop. Pride of place of course went to his pirate radio and it was the eighth wonder of the world to witness Packie on a live broadcast as he read the news, acted as disc jockey and played Irish music when Athlone closed for the night. His transmitter ended up in the nettles at the back of the house, when Tony McTernan, always up to devilment, gave Packie a "tip-off" that the guards were coming. The other youngsters of the time who idolised Packie were Paid Dooner, Pat O'Connell, Michael and Sean Moran. One night they set up a championship

draughts game between Packie and Auld Mulvihill who had the sweep shop across the street. The contest ended in disorder when Packie kicked the board—he couldn't bear to see Mulvihill jumping his men.

When you gathered at the white gates, Greenan's corner, or the Courthouse Wall, somebody thought of something. The crowd would head off on a ceili; to bandbeg to a newly married couple; to a wake; or simply off of play tricks of all descriptions. The greatest trickster in Chapel Lane was Michael Martin, and he was the bane of Johnny Prior's life. Indeed, when Michael emigrated to New York in the late 'forties, Johnny could be heard humming to himself across the half door "there's peace now, the little effer is gone". But deep down he missed him.

Wakes were not to be missed. It was here you learned how to fill the clay pipe, how to light it from the turf in the tongs, how to smoke it without pulling bits off your lip, and how to have a bull's eye in the fire every time with a spit. There were saucers of snuff as well, and if you sat up you got tea and all you could eat. Respect for the dead was dubious, for every effort was made to shake the mattress, move the corpse in the bed or have his mouth pop open.

Life in those days was undoubtedly hard, but no one seemed to notice and no one seems to remember. In our more affluent society now we worry more—about income tax, a second car, central heating, coloured television and overdrafts. Will we be able to pass on, as the past generation did, the memory of the joys of the simple things in life? We're missing out on a lot!

Tráthnóna, Ballinamore — housing estate for the elderly — where our senior citizens can ceili in comfort in their own community centre and enjoy the art of conversation.

