

Leitrim - a decade ago!

Photography: Martin Parr. Text: Fintan O'Toole



Couldn't believe that a photographer would want to be so conspicuous. Martin Parr stood out on the main street on Westport like a lighthouse in the desert.

Other than the dreaded paparazzi, I had thought, photographers were meant to melt into the background, to slink around catching their subjects unawares, taking them off guard, getting the candid fly-on-the-wall feel. Yet here was this beanpole of a man, cameras slung across his body, making no effort to conceal his presence and intentions. On the contrary, it seemed to him morally important that people knew he was there, that what he was doing could be recognised as respectful and respectable, not furtive and exploitative.

At first I thought that his conspicuousness was merely making the best of a bad job: a man of his physique, with his clipped Sussex accent, could hardly, after all, manage to hide himself on the main street of a West of Ireland town during a horse fair. But Gradually I understood that he was doing something much more positive than that: letting people know what he was up to, giving them the chance to make their own judgement about this business of being photographed. I also understood why he had dragged me out of bed with a bad hangover at an ungodly hour of the morning so that we could be in the town before anyone else had arrived. As people dribbled in to the town, he would be one of the first things they would see. By the end of the day, a day during which he didn't once move from the streets, they would be used to him, at ease with his presence. And then he would get the pictures he wanted, pictures that were neither furtive and exploitative, nor posed and self-conscious, pictures of people who knew that there was a lunatic with a camera, hanging around all day in

the rain and had ceased to care.

It helped, in the taking of the photographs that you can see here, and the others which make up the book and exhibition "A Fair Day", that Martin Parr didn't come to Ireland as a white anthropologist goes out to the bush to examine the exotic traits of the natives. Though he was already established as a leading documentary photographer from his work in England, he came here both because he liked Ireland very much and because his wife Susie got a job as the speech therapist for the Sligo-Leitrim area.

The connections are important, since Parr is someone whose work is completely dependent on the framework of being involved with the life of a community.

He doesn't travel around making visual smash-and-grab raids, hoarding a set of images which can then be exhib-

Above: Open air Mass, Mass Rock Kinlough

Below: Mayflower Ballroom, Drumshanbo





ited in the safety of London galleries. "My aim has always been to take good individual photographs, but I need a framework to work within snapping aimlessly at anything of interest is inconclusive. Out of a need to be accurate, I became involved".

This has been the pattern of his work since 1970, when he arrived in Manchester as a nervous 18-year old to study photography, hoping he wouldn't be in digs in a terraced house, and gradually discovered that he was more at home there than in suburban Sussex, that visual excitement wasn't something confined to the sights of great cities. His first project was on

declining Non Conformist communities in West Yorkshire and was done over a number of years. His work in the West of Ireland continued over a five year period in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Similar long, slow engagements with places and communities have resulted in subsequent projects, one on the down-at-heel seaside resort outside Liverpool, New Brighton, another on the comfortable middle-classes of South-East Thatcherite England. The scrupulous concern for accuracy leads on to the belief that you have to be involved with a community in order to be able to see it clearly and truthfully.

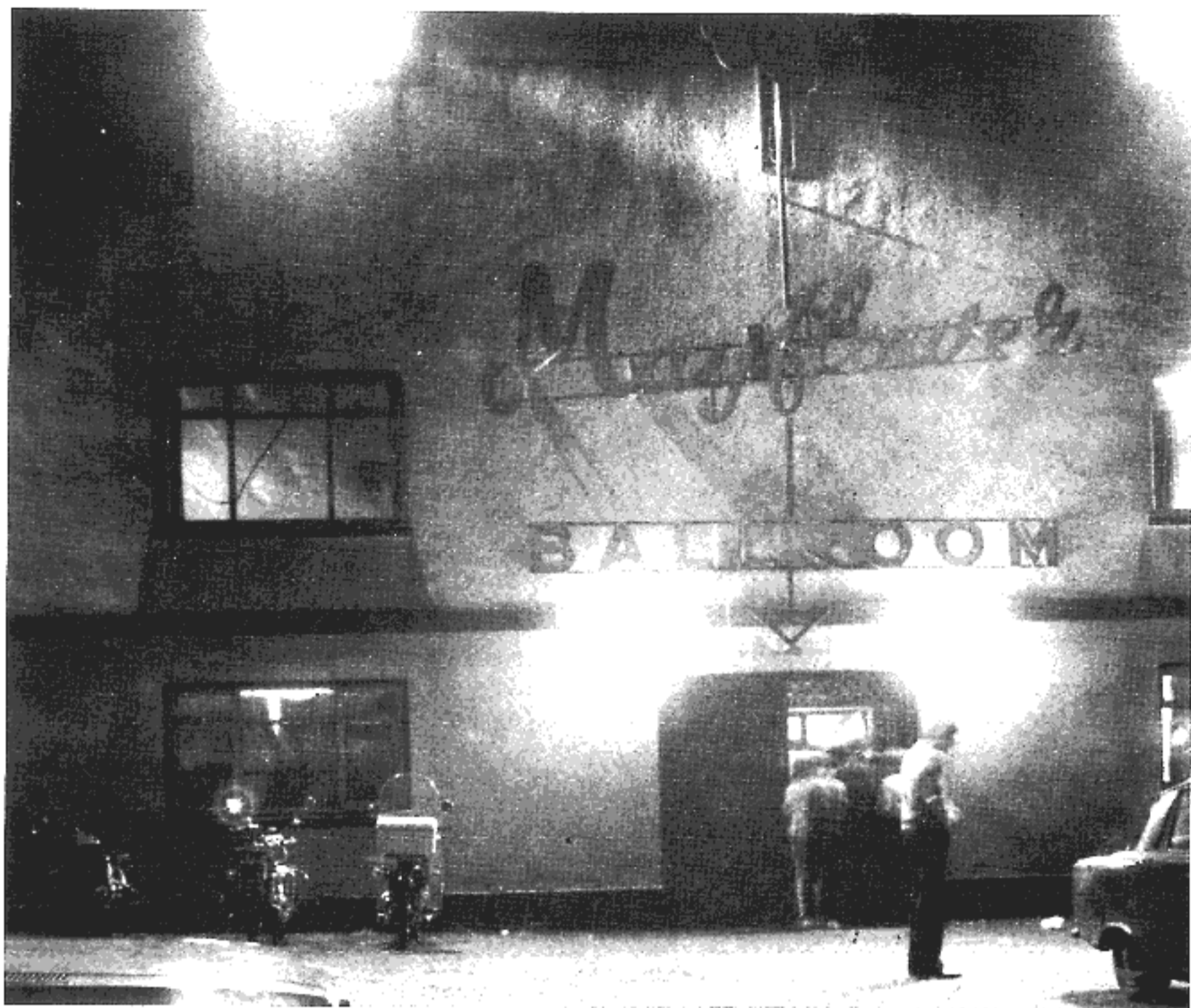
Most of us are used to the idea that there are essentially two kinds of photographs. There are important photographs of important people and sensational events, the kind we consume every day in our newspapers.

And there are the more private photographs of things that are important to us but to nobody else, the pictures of our families and

Above:
St. Mary's Holy Well, Killargue. This well is visited on 15th August, The Feast of Assumption, for private prayers.

Below:
Manorhamilton Sheep Fair.





Top: Exterior of Mayflower Ballroom, Drumshanbo
Left & Above: Interior of Mayflower Ballroom



Above: Lynotts Bar, Manorhamilton, now The Market Bar, owned by Paeckle & Joan Sheridan

Below: Bale of Hay throwing competition. Drumkeerin Festival



friends and our holidays that we put away in the cupboard and take down on family occasions. Martin Parr's photographs suggest that there is a third kind, somewhere in the middle of these two, neither sensational nor private. The pictures you see here have something in common with both kinds of pictures that we normally see. They have the public quality of newspaper photographs, and thus give an importance to the everyday lives of ordinary people. Yet they also have the something of the intimacy of family pictures, giving us the sense that there is a kind of family here. A community, however threatened and broken, is an extended family and pictures like these remind us of that family in the same way that the family photograph album reminds us of our family even when it is scattered or absent or under stress. This combination of two kinds of photograph gives a dignity to these pictures, prevents them from ever seeming like the work of a gawking intruder.

The human sympathy that is always a part of Martin Parr's pictures expresses itself in a sense of humour that is a laughing with, rather than a laughing at the subjects. The rain, the muck, the hard slog, sometimes the sadness, that are present in the pictures are elements you know to be shared by

the photographer and those he photographs. If the people in the pictures are drenched and miserable, so is the photographer. If they are up to their ankles in cowdung, so is the photographer. And out of this sharing comes a sense of humour that, amazingly for an English photographer seems very Irish. It is the wry, bittersweet humour of carrying on regardless, of standing back for a minute and looking at ourselves and wondering how and why do we go on at all. When we look at our selves and our unavailing struggle against the

rain and the muck and the powers that be, we find ourselves to be comical creatures. That these pictures, even though there are not almost a decade old, still hold that humorous dignity that is so characteristically Irish, is a sure sign of their accuracy.

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