

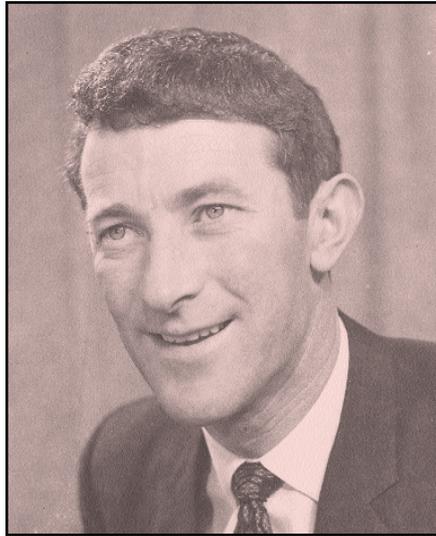
My Leitrim

Larry Cunningham

LITTLE DID I REALISE when I went into the Eamon Andrews recording studios in 1965 with the words of an Irish ballad that it would launch me on to the big stage and put Leitrim on the map.

Lovely Leitrim has been good to me but could anything match the sheer pleasure and enjoyment it gave to so many Leitrim folk from the Carnival at Cornageeha to the City Centre Ballroom in New York. Such was its popularity; it went on to sell nearly a million records.

The origin of the song goes back to my mother who was born and reared at Ballinamuck. She was a fantastic singer and all belonging to her were musicians and singers. When she moved up to Mid-Longford she brought with her that old sean nós type of singing. I was about eighteen when I first heard her singing this song called Lovely Leitrim. I got into showbusiness and the showband style of that era was made up of pop songs and a bit of country, if you could get away with it. At one stage I sang *Leitrim* (as we called it in our circles) at various venues in Ireland and England. I soon found I was getting a following for it and I decided that if I ever made a record I would put it on the B side. I knew if I put it on the A side it would never be played by RTE because that brand of song was not accepted that time. It



Larry Cunningham who immortalised the county with his recording of Lovely Leitrim

was produced by Noel Kelehan and Bill O'Donovan, two real professionals at their jobs. There was one thing I found very funny that day. In those times recordings were done to a very high level and by the human hand. If you needed string players, such as fiddlers or guitarists, they had to be present at recording but nowadays they have technology to work strings. I remember the four strings that was part of the backing for Lovely Leitrim were four coloured people from the RTE Light Orchestra. I just looked at them and tried to imagine what they thought of the song as they played it. These guys were probably from Germany or Italy and didn't even know that Leitrim existed. The A side of the record was a Jim Reeves song called "There's that smile again" and it was after being at No3 in the charts and that's as far as it was going.

During those years there was a programme called Hospital Requests on RTE every Wednesday. They got hundreds of written requests to play "Leitrim" and eventually decided to put it on air and the rest is history. By the following Monday it had shot into the charts at No 6 from nowhere and within three weeks it was at No 1. Every record we had was sold out but we soon got the shelves stocked up and it spent the next three and a half months in the Top Ten. The success of the song brought me in touch with Leitrim county and its people through the Carnivals that were springing up in Manorhamilton, Drumshanbo, Mohill and all sorts of places.

In the sixties, Leitrim people, like people from every other county, had to emigrate and you had a great contingent of them in England and America. Leitrim was making more headway inside of me than my own county because of the song and by the way it was accepted in foreign countries. I was only a year going on tours to the US when one night in the City Centre in New York the bossman came in a half hour before we went on stage to say there was someone to see. That wasn't unusual at the time but as it turned out this wasn't just another fan. Into the bandroom came a small woman and two big men with her.



Phil Fitzpatrick, a New York mounted policeman from Aughavas, who wrote the song Lovely Leitrim

As we shook hands I asked her who she was. She said her name was Mrs Fitzpatrick. I said: "are you anything to the man that wrote *Lovely Leitrim*". It transpired that Phil Fitzpatrick was her husband and the two burly men were her two sons. She told me that Phil was a mounted policeman with the New York police. While off duty he was involved in a shoot out with two gunmen in a 3rd Avenue restaurant. The two robbers were killed and he was badly wounded and died six days later on May 26th 1947. I went to the police academy where his name is engraved in gold writing on the wall and I felt it was nice to see him being honoured there.

She appreciated meeting the man that made her husband's song famous and she gave me the original piece of paper that he wrote the song on with a pencil. There were six verses but I only used four of those verses.

The success of the song was a complete and utter surprise to me. It was recorded at a time when ballads were out of date and many of my peers in showband circles gave the impression that I had stooped a little too low with "Leitrim" but it wasn't long until many of them were adopting well to the ballads.

Lovely Leitrim has taken out every ballad and dusted it and they have all been recorded since. People often ask what this song has done for me. Well I started with the Grafton Band from Gowra in 1958 while I was still at school. The furthest we ever played was a place called Creevelea up in North Leitrim. It was so far that we had to bring sandwiches for the return trip home.

In 1960 the Mighty Avons were formed and I joined them. At our

first dance we played to a crowd of 2,500 in Castleblayney and we got paid £17 to be divided between nine of us.

For the next three and a half years we played around Longford, Cavan, Monaghan and part of Leitrim. We were big in these regions but we couldn't get the break outside there. Then my idol Jim Reeves did a tour of Ireland and we were lucky enough to get playing with him at a gig in Lifford. A month after his return to America he was tragically killed in a plane crash. A chap from Sligo wrote a four verse tribute to Jim Reeves and I recorded it. It went to No18 in the British charts and I made an appearance on Top of the Pops. With the recording of "Leitrim" things started to move and people in London and Birmingham were clamouring to hear it when we were on tour. It was gaining in popularity every week. The *Leitrim Peoples Association* in New York invited us over nearly every year and they had this big banner with the words "Lovely Leitrim" imprinted on it. Years later while travelling from Bundoran to Kinlough I noticed that

THE MIGHTY AVONS

Larry Cunningham, Peter Smith, Mickie Brady, Paddy Smith, Gerry Walsh, Jimmy Smith, Brian Finley & Ronnie Griffith – The band smashed all records by performing to 6000 Irish emigrants at the Galymore, Cricklewood in 1966.



Leitrim County Council had erected a sign "Welcome to Lovely Leitrim" and I felt a bit proud that I might have been the cause of this.

A couple of years after it was recorded I was again playing in the City Centre in the Big Apple. That night I had to sing "Leitrim" five times on the trot such was the demand from the audience. It was very emotional looking down the big hall at people in the first eight or nine rows and the tears flowing down from their eyes. It really showed me what this song meant to them. It brought back memories and part of home to them. Many of these people had emigrated down the years and few might ever have been back even on holiday. Air transport wasn't what it is today. I was doing a show in Newbridge last night and as soon as I started "Last night I had a pleasant dream..." I got the very same reaction that I got some thirty seven

years ago. Through the song I gained a fondness for Leitrim and it has become a special place for me. Part of the county that is very dear to me is the town of Ballinamore. I opened their festival for seventeen years and you couldn't but be impressed by the number of immigrants that the organising committee was able to bring back for the two weeks. They looked after me well and always presented me with something they were able to make in Leitrim.

In 1994, I joined with a young star Eleanor Shanley from Keshcarrigan and that great singer and ambassador Charlie McGettigan and many more artists in a gala concert in Kelly's Hotel, Mohill. It was a celebratory show by the county to show their appreciation of Charlie's Eurovision success, of Leitrim's Connacht Championship win and the opening of the Ballinamore/Ballyconnell Canal.



*Silver Disc for 250,000 sales of Lovely Leitrim
Hugh Hardy & Larry Cunningham.*

I couldn't help feeling that this is a county on the move. The Shannon water, Fenagh Abbey, Lough Allen's banks and the mythical Sheemore hill are now being marketed worldwide and attracting curious eyes from around the globe to this hidden treasure.

In my heart I share in every little success that comes your way.

Leitrim Guardian Launch 2002

Charlie McGettigan, Leitrim Guardian Personality of the Year, Sean Ó Suilleabháin, who launched The Leitrim Guardian: Tommy Moran, Editor and Sean Sweeney, Chairman. Pic: Willie Donnellan

