

Snapshot of a Wedding Spraoi in 1933

Michael Kelly



Every photograph has a story to tell. Sometimes, if it's an old photo, the key to unlocking that story may be elusive. The date may be uncertain, the picture quality poor, or the identities of the subjects difficult to establish. The photo reproduced above surfaced recently, almost 85 years after it was snapped. A little research has revealed that it was taken around Easter 1933 and that it features a happy event for the Burke family of Curraghlahan in Knock parish. The occasion was a house spraoi celebrating the wedding of Celia (Sally) Burke to John Lavelle of Drimneen, Claremorris. The couple were married in Knock church on Sunday, 30 April 1933. The photograph was brought to my attention by Willie Forde, the present owner of the Burke holding.

Who is in the photograph?

In the back row, from left to right, are four Burke siblings: Michael, Celia (the bride), Patrick (Pake) and Margaret (Maggie) and their mother Mary Anne (née Forde). In front is the Burkes' uncle, James Michael Forde (with his accordion), along with three neighbours: Tom Royan (with fiddle) from Curraghlahan and Mrs Mary Morley (née Cavanagh), who is holding a book, and her grand-daughter Maureen Morley, both from nearby Carrowcor. It was Maureen's brother, Michael Morley - still hale and hearty in Carrowcor - who confirmed their identities, although he was too young to have any memory of the wedding itself, being under two years old at the time. The identity of the photographer is unknown. Cameras were scarce in those days but a few had come from America with the influx of US visitors for the Eucharistic Congress of 1932. Incidentally, that was the year that another fine photo of Mrs Morley (together with her grandchildren) had been taken. It was reproduced by Michael's daughter, Monica Morley - well-known for her work in Knock and her

broadcasts on MidWest Radio - in her wonderful 2013 book, *Family Footprints*, which details her own ancestry.

Fiddler Royan

What is particularly interesting about this 1933 photograph is the presence of two local musicians along with their instruments. The single-row accordion-player, James Michael Forde, lived in the Forde home-place in the townland of Sragh, not far from Burkes. The house is now occupied by Aghamore footballer Tom Forde, son of Willie. The locality is generally known as Cloonfaughna.

But the dominant figure in the photo is undoubtedly the fiddler with the hard hat and the pipe in his mouth! Then a sprightly octogenarian, 'Tomeen' Royan was born just after the Great Famine. I had often heard his name mentioned by my late father, John Kelly (1916-2012), who lived nearby in Lissaniska (Bekan parish) and who as a teenager, knew Royan quite well. He distinctly remembered the elderly fiddler, then unable to walk, being transported by ass-and-cart to supply music at local house dances in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Royan, a bachelor, lived alone in an isolated little cottage, traces of which may still be seen, on the Burke holding in Curraghlahan. A century earlier, the Royans had held a farm of 40 acres in Curraghlahan but, according to local lore, were later evicted. By the 1850s, the entire townland was in the possession of Dominick Burke, possibly a native of Aghamore according to local tradition. Royan's parents, James Royan and Mary Carr, were recorded in Curraghlahan in the 1851 census. We know this because in February 1922, when Tomeen was applying for the Old Age Pension, an extract from the 1851 census was obtained for him by district councillor Michael Morley of Lissaniska, to verify his age. This was just a few months

before the original census returns went up in flames when the Four Courts was destroyed during the Civil War. The fiddler's surname, incidentally, appears in various forms in the records – as Ryan, Royan and even Rhine (1901 Census). It may, in fact, be a variant of Ruane. The surname is quite unusual in the locality now, although there was an elderly couple named Ryan in the adjacent townland of Carrowcor in 1901.

Incidentally, Royan's older brother John, who had died in August 1914, was also musical. In fact, in the 1901 census John's occupation was recorded as 'violin player'. The only other Mayo person described as a 'violin player' in that census also happened to be from Knock parish, namely Martin Sammon, the blind fiddler from Cloonturnaun.

Knock Weddings in earlier generations

While we have little information about the Burke-Lavelle wedding of 1933, we know that weddings of that era were certainly far less lavish affairs than they tend to be today. But even in the 1930s, locals were contrasting the weddings of that time with those of earlier generations. Here's how one Knock resident, coincidentally also named Burke, described the weddings of his grandparents' day in the course of an interview in 1937:

In those days the marriage was arranged and everybody knew it for almost a month or so beforehand. Every side car in the village was got ready for the "drag" as it was called, and the horses got extra corn to have them ready for the drive. Sometimes there were fifteen or twenty cars at a big "drag". Before this the people used to ride on horseback. This was before cars came into existence.

The people did not get married during Lent, and generally there was a rush by those who were slow in getting married on Shrove Tuesday. If they did not get married before Shrove Tuesday, they could not get married until after Lent. In the towns on Shrove Tuesday the people had a habit of throwing salt on the girls who were not married so as to preserve them for another year!

At that time the bride always got a fortune. It was not always money. Often the match was broken off because the girl who was getting married did not get an extra cow or heifer. They had certain days for getting married - Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were the principal days. There were many phishroges about marriage days.

This account was recorded by Tobias Burke from John Burke (then aged 55), of Wingfield, Knock for the Schools Folklore Collection. He then went on to describe the wedding spraoi itself:

A wedding spraoi

On the night of the wedding all the people gathered to the house and there was a big dance, and of course plenty to eat and drink. A piper or fiddler was often brought long distances to supply the music, and a night of merriment followed, with plenty of drink. Song after song was sung, and later the kitchen door was taken off its hinges and placed on the floor, and the best step dancer danced jigs, reels, and

hornpipes on it, and it was often a competition between the friends of the newly married couple to see who could best the other dancing.

The events during this night were often disturbed by crowds of "straw boys" or "whalpers" as they were called to wish the newly married couple luck and to drink their health in mugs of porter, or glasses of whiskey. If they were refused, as they sometimes were, the "straw boys" often did a lot of damage before going away, such as throwing over a stack or two in the haggard or pulling thatch off the house, and sometimes wrecking the house before they left. As a rule the party did not leave till day light even in winter - then wishing the newly married couple luck and happiness, they departed.

Mind you, many of the wedding features described by John Burke were still in evidence in the 1930s and indeed much later.

The dancing school at Curraghlahan

Like the weddings described by John Burke, we can be sure that dancing featured prominently at the Burke spraoi in April 1933 because there were plenty of good dancers in the locality at that time. Many of them had benefited from the dancing tuition given some years earlier in that townland by one of the last of the travelling dancing masters, John Tuohy, of Kiltimagh. In 1926 my own father, then a 10 year old, was one of a sizeable group – both young and old – who attended Tuohy's dancing classes which were actually held in Burkes' granary in Curraghlahan (which is still there) over a period of several weeks. Some of them, like my father, were learning from scratch, while the older pupils were availing of the opportunity to practice or polish their steps.

What became of the people in the photo?

Before we conclude this journey back in time, readers of Glór may wonder what happened afterwards to the happy group in the photograph of 1933. According to my father, fiddler Royan ended his days in the house of his neighbours, the Eagney family of Srah, but I have failed to trace a record of his death, which must have occurred in the 1930s. Mrs Morley, his exact contemporary, lived on for almost another decade, passing away in 1942, aged 88. Her grand-daughter Maureen Morley was a great friend of my aunt, Anne Kelly; they both emigrated to England where they both died in their early 40s in the same month - June 1967. Mrs Mary Anne Burke died in 1958 aged 89. Her brother, the accordionist James Michael Forde, died at home in 1961, aged 84. As for the Burke siblings, Michael emigrated to England where he died in 1969, aged 64. Maggie and Pake, whom I well remember, remained in Curraghlahan where they died in 1963 and 1985 respectively. And what of the radiant bride herself? Sadly, Celia Burke-Lavelle died young in 1948, at the early age of 40. She and her husband John are buried in Ballinasmalla cemetery.

But I prefer to leave them as I find them in the photograph – a happy group 'frozen in time' in 1933 as they celebrated a joyful family occasion to the sound of accordion and fiddle.