



The spectacular cliffs at Carrowteige.



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Michael Connolly recalled growing up in Carrowteige in the 1920s

PART ONE

By Tom Gillespie

A NORTH Mayo shopkeeper, farmer and fisherman, Michael Connolly, in an article entitled 'From Needles To Anchors', in Brian P. Martin's 1996 *More Tales of the Old Countrymen* publication, recounted his family's early history.

As a shopkeeper in one of the most remote corners of western Ireland, with the sea never far away and transport always slow, Michael Connolly once had to provide customers with 'everything from needles to anchors'.

And many others things which could not be ordered from distant towns were harvested locally from land and sea.

Even now, many years later, this refreshingly wild and isolated part of Mayo demands a high degree of self-sufficiency.

Michael valued the travelling library's fortnightly visit to Rossport, its DIY books having enabled him to carry out all the maintenance required on his house.

And its educational works were instrumental in him gaining third place and a prize of £100 in a writing competition organised by Mayo County Council.

One of eight children, Michael Joseph Connolly was born on August 15, 1923, at Stonefield, Carrowteige, on the peninsula neighbouring Rossport.

He wrote: "My ancestors were driven here, from their land east of the Shannon, by Cromwell's army, and the cry was: 'To Hell, or Connaught'. After they settled, all lands, fishing rights and so on were given to English landlords, with the result that, to this day, the people of the area, for the most part, have to emigrate to survive.

"The first Connolly in these parts had to flee his native Galway because of his activities. He was known as a 'hedge' schoolmaster because the English banned teaching, which he had to carry on behind hedges and ditches to escape detection.

Later, when teaching was legalised, he taught in a school at Carrowteige and his salary was £12 a year.

“The celebration of Mass was also prohibited, but that, too, was celebrated in isolated places, and very often a large rock was used instead of an altar. Hence the term ‘Mass rock’ in several places throughout Ireland.”

Michael’s grandfather was a fisherman and farmer who never left home, but his father was far more restless:

“He fished from the age of 16, mainly for lobsters, before going away to work on Scottish mines.

“Then he went to the States where he gathered a few bob on the trams, which enabled him to come back and start a shop at Stonefield. But I don’t know whether mum and dad married in the States or here.”

Michael’s very earliest memory is of clinging to his father’s shoulders while out swimming.

“We were only 50 yards from the shore, but I thought we were halfway to America! I started bawling, but thankfully it didn’t stop my love of the sea.”

Another memory from that time shows just how isolated the community was. When young Michael drank half a bottle of Sloan’s Linament the doctor had to come 20 miles to revive him. But he was soon up and about, helping his father to fish for the pot.

He remembers these days vividly: “Sometimes we’d empty the water from rock pools to get the small fish which frequented them. Later, in my early teens, while fishing around remote islands, myself and a few pals would sometimes be put ashore to collect birds’ eggs for cake-making. And on spring tides father used to take huge crabs from the rocks. He had to insert his arm full length into a hole barely wide enough to extract the crab.

“I was never too keen on this as a big crab would almost crush the bone if he got his claw around it. Many years ago a man was unable to extract his arm, and drowned when the tide rose.

“The crab holes were at or near low water and far away from the village, so any cries for help would not be heard. Until about five years ago crabs were very plentiful - I’ve seen up to a 100 taken from a French barrel pot; but then there was no great demand for them. Now you would have to go about 10 miles from the coast to get any crabs.”

The Connolly’s craft was the traditional curragh, a boat like an elongated coracle, of which there are at least four different four types in Ireland. Michael still finished a curragh he helped to build, and insists that it is one of the safest boats ever made:

“Without a keel it rides the sea the same as a seagull, and it takes a lot of wind to upset one. You should see the seas them old boats cut through. The biggest curraghs were some 22-feet long and had four men rowing with one steering. Each man has one 12-foot oar, 4x3 inches pared down at the blade. These were usually only ordinary white deal, but in those days the timber was much better. Smaller curraghs, used for lighter work, were propelled by paddles, three pairs at times.

“Because the traditional curragh is built very light, it comes into its own where there are no piers and it has to be carried to safety.

“To make it we generally used hazel rods about five-feet long and the thickness of a broom handle. They were softened with

hot water or steam so they could be bent to fit into the holes bored into the main frame, which could be any handy light timber.

“But nowadays access to the shore is often easier, and a lot of oak is used for frames because many people are more concerned that the wood should be long-lasting rather than light.

“The ‘skin’ of the curragh used to be made from calico, which was available everywhere, and we sewed it down the centre to get the width. This was treated with Stockholm tar (prepared from resinous pinewood), which was the best, but later we had to use ordinary coal tar mixed with pitch which came in blocks and had to be boiled for an hour or more. You would drop a little on a stone and rub a wetted finger on it. If it didn’t stick it was ready for applying.”

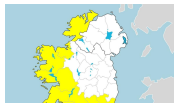
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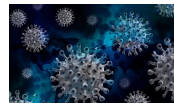
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- [SPORT](#)
- [ENTERTAINMENT](#)
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- [GALLERY](#)
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- [EPAPER](#)
- [NEWSPAPER ARCHIVE](#)

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