

# FROM NEEDLES TO ANCHORS



MICHAEL CONNOLLY

*SHOPKEEPER, FARMER AND FISHERMAN*  
*County Mayo, Ireland*

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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 other things which could not be ordered from distant towns were harvested locally from land and sea. Even now, many years later, his refreshingly wild and isolated part of Mayo demands a high degree of self-sufficiency. Michael still values the travelling library's fortnightly visit to Rosspport, its DIY books having enabled him to carry out all the maintenance required on his house. And its educational works were instrumental in his 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 15 August 1923 at Stonefield, Carrowteige, on the peninsula neighbouring Rosspport. He recounts his family's early history:

My ancestors were driven here, from their lands 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 or ditches to escape detection. Later, when teaching was legalised, he taught in a school at Carrowteige and his salary was just £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 sixteen, mainly for lobsters, before going away to work in 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 the 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 fifty yards from the shore, but I thought we were half-way 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 Sloane's Linament the doctor had to come twenty 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 rockpools 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 a 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 villages, so

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any cries for help would not be heard. Until about five years ago crabs were very plentiful – I've seen up to a hundred taken from a French barrel pot; but then there was no great demand for them. Now you would have to go about ten miles from the coast to get any crabs.



*The traditional curragh is light and easy to carry*

The Connollys' craft was the traditional curragh, a boat like an elongated coracle, of which there are at least four different types in Ireland. Michael still fishes 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 had one 12-foot oar, 4 x 3 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 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.

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*Michael Connolly baling out his curragh, which he helped to build*

The 'skin' of the curragh used to be made from calico, which was available everywhere, and you 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.

Michael was among sixty to seventy children at Carrowteige National School, but he is not sure when he went there; he thinks he was probably around five or six years old. He describes those early years:

In those days many children went part-time because they had to help with the farm work and other things. But I was not that mad for school, anyway. Our family had about eighty sheep on the common ground and I often had to mind them. There were no wires then, and the fences only came when the commonage was split up among the owners. So us boys also had to mind that the cows didn't get into the potatoes.

We ate well at home, but mainly plain food. We fattened our own pig and hung the bacon in the rafters, but it was mostly fish and lots of potatoes – we loved them then, and we love them yet! The sandy soil makes for wonderful spuds here. I used to take the potatoes from the field, put them in a hole in the ground, cover them with sand and build a fire on top using driftwood. Delicious! And with the fish I always liked the wrasse best, even though it has little commercial value. Just plain boil it fresh, or leave it overnight with salt on.

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Young Connolly went fishing at every opportunity, sometimes with home-made rods fashioned from a broom handle, cane or hazel. And on the rivers he used a spillet, a long line with bent safety-pins baited with worms to catch small eels. Other boyhood games and pastimes included feats of strength, running and jumping; Michael recollects them clearly:

We had a ball made from roots torn from the sand and bound with twine. Another was a pig's bladder blown up. You wouldn't kick it very far against the wind!

Local houses were lit with oil lamps, then later paraffin. Water was easily obtained from the many spring wells in the area, and most people had a tank to catch the rain. Us kids often washed in the sea.

There was a lot of thatch then. Turfs about as big as a rug were laid over the rafters, which never had nails in, and covered with mainly rye straw as it was so tough. Most people thatched their own cottages, and later on I did hayricks, too.

Heating was always by peat and a little bog wood. One house I knew had no proper chimney, only a stone fireplace with the smoke coming out into the room and rising up through a hole in the roof when it wanted to. The seats on either side of the hearth were huge stones. This cottage was just one big room about 25 feet long, with the kitchen at one end and four or five cows at the other. The bed was right next to the fire and the horse was near the bed. The floor was rough stone, not even good flag, and there was no attic. The walls were 18-inch-thick



*'And with the fish I always liked the wrasse best...'*

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stone held together by gravel mortar with a bit of lime.

Most people were very poor, but very happy. It was all *maitheal* [joining together to get through the work]; I've seen as many as ten women around a frame stitching a bed quilt. But the women were always more at home than the men as superstition kept them away from the fishing. Nine or ten men would often gather round in a house, but usually only to talk. Ghost stories were a great thing then.

Local roads were very rough, being 'coarse gravel and one big problem. Even later, when they were tarred, it was always a bit worrying going to the side to let a lorry pass. It's ridiculous the huge vehicles they let on now. With the bog underneath the roads are always breaking up.

'I drove at ten in bare feet. Everyone was in bare feet then. I had a job to reach the clutch, but you didn't have to worry about indicators! Later on, when I was eighteen, we put on a taxi service, which was big business then with lots of people going away to pull beet in England, mostly May to October.'

As the coast is so indented in that area it was often quicker to go by boat across an estuary rather than travel all the way around by land. In any case, many parts were without proper roads. Michael recounts the many details of local life:

Up here there were two brothers who were full-time ferrymen. The priest used to come by boat and there was always a horseman to meet him.

Bodies, too, were ferried around by boat, the one cemetery being used by four or five villages, each with about twenty-five dwellings. Coffins were always carried on shoulders: there were *men* around at that time! Bodies were hardly ever taken to church as it was too far; they'd be waked in the house, with the usual load of tobacco and clay pipes, which the men often left on the ground. And there was always the home-brew poteen, as there were no pubs nearer than McGrath's, right round the estuary.

My old man was fairly keen on the poteen. Potatoes are often used to make it, but the handiest way is with molasses, treacle and sugar. Over near Ballycastle they had beautiful stuff made from barley. It was matured for at least six to twelve months, and had such a rich smell. Nothing like it now. Poteen should always be put through less than a gallon an hour, the final run just like a silk thread. Before the pubs started up in the area, myself and a friend borrowed the equipment to produce our own poteen, as you couldn't be sure of the quality of the stuff you would buy.

Just after the war you could hardly get good whiskey, but I had another source of drink. Spanish trawlers, about a couple of hundred ton each, used to fish in pairs near here. They had agents at Ballyglass, and when they radioed in to say they were coming in with fish for a fortnight I'd be there to meet them. I bought their brandy for only 10s [50p] a bottle, and sold it for good profit. But they robbed us of fish. I've seen them leaving Ballyglass with cod and other species all over the deck, and only an inch of freeboard.

When Michael's father first started the shop he, too, was dependent on the sea for transport:

He began by collecting two tons of supplies at a time by curragh. And it was really hard work once a fortnight, unloading with no pier and hauling along rough tracks. After that he trav-

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elled the twenty-five miles by road to Belmullet by horse and cart. Then he used a sailing boat, and in 1927 bought his first truck.

I was very lucky, and had access to everything in the shop, from sweets to Woodbines, and there wasn't much we didn't carry. We kept everything from cart grease and horseshoes to farm implements and turf spades. And if we didn't stock it, we'd soon order it; but it was a long time before the commercial travellers started to come round and make life easier. Towards the end we even did undertaking, using coffins made by local tradesmen and fittings that Father stocked.



*The shop kept 'everything from Woodbines to cart grease'*

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We had about ten chests full of tea in the attic, and you always had to put out three or four for the old women, to see which ones they liked the look of. Even the worst of it then was better than the dust you get now. Sugar, too, came in large quantities – 2cwt sacks – and putting it in small bags was one of my jobs.

Michael left his mainly Irish-speaking school at the age of fourteen, and worked in the shop when he could be spared from the family farm. He soon learnt the art of patience: 'Customers very seldom paid immediately, and when they did it was often with eggs, grain or meat rather than money. But sometimes people had a few bob from good fishing or making poteen. And very nearly everyone had somebody in the States then, so the post-man would be closely watched for a few dollars.'

When World War II came along, Michael spent three years as a coastal watcher. He describes what this involved:

It was fairly well paid, but the beauty for me was going away on training courses, to Galway and Athlone. Each lookout post was numbered and there were three or four between here and Belmullet. We had wonderful binoculars and telescopes, but the convoys were so far out all you saw were the masts. However, you could see the Flying Fortresses circling, with lost Yanks in, trying to read the post numbers to help find their way home.

Very few German planes passed, and there was little action in the area. But I do remember when the liner *Andorra Star* was torpedoed; it was carrying German and Italian prisoners-of-war, and several of their bodies came ashore here. The two biros found on them were the first ever seen in this area! I also got part of a lifeboat with the name on it, tins of biscuits, two or three big tins of coffee and loads of other things. I was coming home on wings to tell them about it!

Michael moved to his present home, at Rossport, shortly after he married Eva in 1952.

Her parents lived next door, and her uncle offered us this house. I had a truck then, and my business was general haulage of peat to Ballina and bringing stuff back, anything and everything from pigs to wardrobes. I travelled up to about sixty miles.

Peat around here is the very best and has always been in demand. On my patch I'm now down about ten feet, into the second cutting. There are at least several feet more, but then you get the problems with water run-off. When the machines came in they could deal with all the tough places the people had neglected. The peat is sold in boxes by the ton, usually three- to five-ton loads. Now [1994] a trailer load about 10 feet long, 7 feet wide and 6 feet high costs up to £90 locally, and we'd have about six loads in a year. When I was a boy the cheapest was about £7 a load. It's sometimes sold by the stack, but then the quantity's a bit of guesswork.

In about 1960 Michael and a few other men bought a 32-foot half-decker and fished it for about three years, mainly on lobsters and crayfish. But as Michael pointed out, 'it was very difficult due to the lack of proper piers, and very dangerous due to the treacherous coastline and the lack of other boats in the area at the time. The nearest lifeboat station then was sixty miles away, so if anything went wrong, one hadn't much hope of rescue.' He continues:



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Then, 26-foot boats became available, and I fished them for a few years, mainly on salmon and lobsters. I gave up commercial fishing in 1975 to work a small farm as my family had moved out. I still fish for the pot with my 18-foot curragh, sometimes with my wife. Pollack and wrasse are the main catch, with the odd summer sea-trout and lobster.

When we were kids and forever bathing, at least in summer, you would sometimes hear a shout where someone had stepped on a plaice. Of course the tendency was to jump off, but after a while some of us learnt to press down, and sometimes we caught a good-sized fish. And dabs and flounders were plentiful in the estuaries as late as the 1970s.

But the fishing's nothing like it was. On a good day I've had as many as twenty flatfish in a few hours fishing with lugworm; now, there is hardly one left. In the old days, too, you could almost go out with a bucket and lift the salmon, there were so many. And the mackerel shoals would nearly blind you with their phosphorescence; the sea would almost take off with them.

The increase in seals and over-fishing's only half the problem. I always loved beachcombing and used to get lots of strange wood, weed, coconuts and other things which must have come from South America. But in the last five years there's not been one bit of this, and my theory is that the Gulf Stream has changed course, resulting in a colder sea and poorer inshore fishing. This used to be one of the richest fishing grounds in Europe. Four of us in a 26-footer once got six thousand mackerel in a day with only handlines and jigs. And I can remember fifty English steam [coal] trawlers out here in the bay at one time.

When they weren't protected, we used to get a bounty of £1, which later rose to £2, for a seal's head, though we actually sent in only the noses because of the size. I've counted at least twenty-five salmon taken from my nets by seals in one day, and the bits they leave are quite unsaleable. So I always used to shoot them at every chance I had. I wouldn't like to do away with them completely, but I do think they should be controlled. There's all these rich folk here in the winter with their chargers chasin' the foxes for *fun*, but we're not supposed to shoot the seals, and that's our living!

We also shot the cormorant, for a bounty of ten shillings. There used to be every kind of wildlife here, but now there's only about 25 per cent left. But at least we still have the brent geese, and plenty of otters, which take no notice of me.

Michael still gathers the local shellfish, but only for home consumption. Among them are mussels, cockles, winkles, clams and several others whose English names he does not know. Among his favourites are limpets, which he puts through the mincer after boiling.

He also harvests the seaweed, 'the long, flat, black, slimy variety which can be reached at low water. I used to sell it by the thirty-ton load. It was in great demand for baths, which people would pay to visit. And in the war it was used when bandages were short. They also noticed that it helped to cure wounds, but the big drug companies wouldn't want to hear that! I found the seaweed excellent for my arthritic elbow; it cured it in two weeks, but it did colour my arm a bit. I always rub it on my face for shaving – it's better than any soap, as the Japanese know. That's why I have such good skin. And sometimes I have a bath with it.' When Michael does so, Eva says 'he has so much seaweed in there you can just see his head poking out like a seal. It makes the bath a bit brown, but he really believes in it!'

Michael has also sampled 'dulse', seaweed which is generally eaten when dried and sells for about 25p per ounce. 'Another, called "slouk" or "slowk" – *sloucan* in Irish – is eaten

after cooking, and was once in great demand for export.'

Another local wild product which is still harvested and commonly sold in shops is Carrageen moss. 'Nowadays people mostly take it for their chests and to make custard, but in the old days we chiefly fed it to young calves to make their coats shine.'

But even without the help of seaweed and such a healthy natural diet, I think Michael Connolly would have a fine glow to his skin because he lives in such an invigorating area. The friendliness of the local people was most apparent when I stayed at nearby McGrath's Inn, which has been in the same family for centuries. There, too, the spirit of independence and self-sufficiency remains strong.

As I supped my first pint of stout at McGrath's, the landlord's son came in from the sleety gale cradling a weak, newborn lamb which needed urgent treatment. Later that evening tables and chairs were quickly moved aside and a curtain drawn across one end of the bar when the local 'keep fit' class arrived. But then there was just a little rivalry as the music accompanying the unseen, energetic fitness pupils competed with the ever-increasing volume of the now almost universal bar television. In front of the Guinness and Smithwick's pumps, a row of proud heads, most of them speaking Irish, angled up and sideways, determined to hear the wise words of their lady president. All seemed content to watch the world from afar.

'How is the lamb?' I asked Mrs McGrath the landlady as she relaxed with me by the fire. 'Dead!' she proclaimed without a flicker of emotion. But then she had only just returned from her fifth funeral in one week, such is the strength of the local community. And I was not too surprised, either, when she told me that when she went to London she did not have time to see any sights at all because she had so many relatives and friends to visit! 'I didn't want to offend anyone.'

The everyday lives and adventures of the local people have long provided rich subject matter for traditional song, a great interest of Michael's. He has composed several ballads in English and Irish, some of which have been sung by his son on the Irish language radio station, Radio na Gaeltachta, on which Michael, too, has broadcast.

Two of the Connollys' sons live in Galway, but the third and their only daughter live in southern England, in very contrasting surroundings. Yet while their lives there may be more exciting or provide more lucrative employment, far greater natural treasures remain in their homeland.

In his soft western voice, Michael summed up his feelings as we strolled along the shore at the bottom of his long garden. 'Would you believe me when I say I actually cried one morning when I came down here to lift the nets. The sun was just coming up, everything was all rose-tinted, and I thought of my son away in London, and all that he was missing.'