

O'Keeffe, Pádraig

by Lawrence William White

O'Keeffe, Pádraig (1887–1963), traditional musician, was born 8 October 1887 at Glountane (Gleanntán), Knockdown townland, near Castleisland, Co. Kerry, eldest of four sons and four daughters of John Leahy O'Keeffe, teacher, and Margaret O'Keeffe (née O'Callaghan), of a musical family from Doonasleen (Doon), Kiskeam, Co. Cork. In accord with prevailing local custom, as the firstborn son he was fostered at an early age to the home of his maternal grandparents in Doon, and attended the nearby Ummeraboy national school. Showing a ready aptitude for music – he could tune the fiddle at age four, and also learned the accordion and concertina – he was deeply influenced by his uncle Callaghan 'Cal' O'Callaghan, an accomplished fiddler recently returned after twenty years in the USA. He completed his primary schooling on returning to his parents' home in Glountane, then attended secondary school in Ballydesmond, Co. Cork. Bowing to parental expectations, he qualified as a teacher at a Dublin training college; after occupying two substitute posts, he was assigned to Glountane national school during his father's illness, and was appointed principal teacher in May 1915 within a month of his father's death.

In contrast to his father, a severe classroom (and household) disciplinarian known to his pupils as 'the roaster', Pádraig was kind-hearted and easygoing. Though a gifted teacher, as his life's work would attest, he was restless within the confines of professional responsibility and classroom routine. A heavy drinker from an early age, playing music in public and private houses late into the nights, he was frequently absent from his duties, reliant on his sister Norah, the other teacher in the one-room school, to cover his classes. After several reprimands and repeated unsatisfactory inspectors' reports, O'Keeffe walked out of the job on the day that a newly assigned co-master arrived (June 1920). After trying his hand at cattle dealing, and working for a year as a civil servant in Tralee, he adopted the precarious but self-regulated trade of a full-time travelling music teacher. Ranging throughout Sliabh Luachra – a remote upland region of indeterminate extent straddling the Kerry – Cork border eastwards of Castleisland – he walked up to thirty miles (48 km) daily in all weathers, calling at the houses of pupils. As most of his pupils, unlike himself, were musically illiterate, he devised a simple system of notation in which he wrote out tunes for the pupil to practise until his next visit: the four spaces of the standard five-line staff represented the four strings of the fiddle, with the digits 0 to 4 placed in the appropriate spaces to indicate the fingering required to play each note (0 representing an open string). He contrived a similar 'code' for the accordion, and could adapt the system to other instruments.

O'Keeffe commanded a vast repertory of tunes, some of his own composition, some learned by ear from other musicians, or radio, or recordings, or read in printed collections; it was said that he knew every tune of O'Neill's 1,001. Performing at

house dances, informal gatherings, and in the many pubs that punctuated his daily rounds, he routinely astonished fellow musicians with entire evenings of previously unheard tunes, which he would write out on request on odd scraps of paper that came to hand. Never terribly keen to play for dancers, he preferred to play for listening, and rendered dance tunes in a stately, deliberate tempo, caressing every note. He had a remarkable sensitivity for slow airs, his favourites including 'The banks of the Danube' and 'O'Rahilly's grave'. In performing 'The old man rocking the cradle' he would use a large metal door key held in his teeth against the fiddle bridge to mute the tone and mimic an infant's crying. O'Keeffe's treatment of a piece was classical in temper, a self-effacing concentration on the integrity of the music – the performer's purpose being to express the beauty, the depth, the shape of the tune – not a self-aggrandising display of virtuosity. He disdained elaborate flourishes or gratuitous ornamentation; skill in technique and imagination in variation were subservient to the meaning of the music, embellishing the piece, not the player.

A colourful character, O'Keeffe was a celebrated wit and conversationalist with a rich fund of anecdote; his stories and sayings, and accounts of his exploits, endure in local folklore. After abandoning in early manhood his courtship of a local girl, under pressure from his mother who disapproved the match, he never married, but led a confirmed bachelor's life based in the family's substantial two-storey house across from the school at Glountane crossroads. The fiddle was 'the missus', his 'only wife'. He told of once leaving a fiddle – 'the first wife' – outside during a night of heavy rain; she got the rheumatics, and was no good to him thereafter. Asked by the lender of a bicycle about the vehicle's whereabouts, he pointed to his throat: 'Look down and see if the handlebars are sticking up.' Hearing a pub discussion about the mileage performance of various automobiles, he remarked that he himself that day had done thirty miles to the pint. He described having a dream in which a publican notorious for his meanness stood him a whiskey, asking whether he preferred it hot or cold. 'Hot,' Pdraig replied, only to awaken before the kettle had boiled; 'if I'd had it cold, I'd have been right.' Short of funds, he would enter a pub with 'the entrance fee' – the price of the first pint – confident that his music and conversation would induce others to buy him drinks. When music and drink were flowing, he was 'purring'; on nights of rare conviviality he was 'purring high'. Such affability notwithstanding, O'Keeffe was deeply private and enigmatic, by personality and mode of life set apart from the crowd.

One of the major figures in the history of Irish traditional music, O'Keeffe left an indelible mark on the distinctive regional style of Sliabh Luachra, an important centre of the mid-twentieth-century revival of the genre. His teaching and playing were central to the preservation and evolution of the style through a period of minimal interest in traditional music. Indifferent to reputation, and travelling little outside Sliabh Luachra, O'Keeffe was not recorded until the late 1940s, when he was nearly 60 and past his prime. The finest examples are those made by Séamus Ennis (qv), with whom his relationship was mutually empathetic; some of these have been commercially released. *Kerry fiddles* (1977), comprising Ennis's 1952 recordings for

the BBC, includes solos by O'Keeffe, and duets and trios with the brother and sister Denis Murphy (1910–74) and Julia Clifford (1914–97), his most illustrious students. *The Sliabh Luachra fiddle master* (1993), issued to accompany a series of four RTÉ radio programmes by Peter Browne, includes music from Radio Éireann recordings of 1948–9. A third set of recordings, made by Ennis for the folklore commission (1947), is in UCD. A celebrated photograph of O'Keeffe wielding fiddle, bow, and glass of stout was taken by Liam Clancy during recording sessions in 1955 with the American folklorist Diane Hamilton, who included a track by O'Keeffe on the LP *The lark in the morning*. During the severe winter of 1962–3, O'Keeffe was periodically isolated in his home, and stranded for a week in a Castleisland pub. Falling seriously ill, he was admitted to St Catherine's hospital, Tralee, where he died on 22 February 1963. Burial was in the family plot in Kilananama graveyard, Cordal. A portrait bust in Scartaglen overlooks Lyons's pub, his favourite haunt.

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GRO (birth cert.); Séamus Ennis, 'Pádraig O'Keeffe, the last of the old fiddle-masters: a memoir', *Fonn* (Oct. 1963); Peter Browne, sleeve notes to *The Sliabh Luachra fiddle master: Pádraig O'Keeffe*, RTÉ CD 174 (1993); id., 'The Sliabh Luachra fiddle master: Pádraig O'Keeffe (1887–1963)', *Ceol na hÉireann*, ii (1994), 61–78; Dermot Hanifin, *Pádraig O'Keeffe: the man and his music* (1995); David Lyth, *Bowing styles in Irish fiddle playing*, ii: *Munster* (1996), 25–30; Fintan Vallely (ed.), *Companion to Irish traditional music* (1999); Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson, *Rough guide to Irish music* (2001); Liam Clancy, *Memoirs of an Irish troubadour* (2002); information from Irish Traditional Music Archive