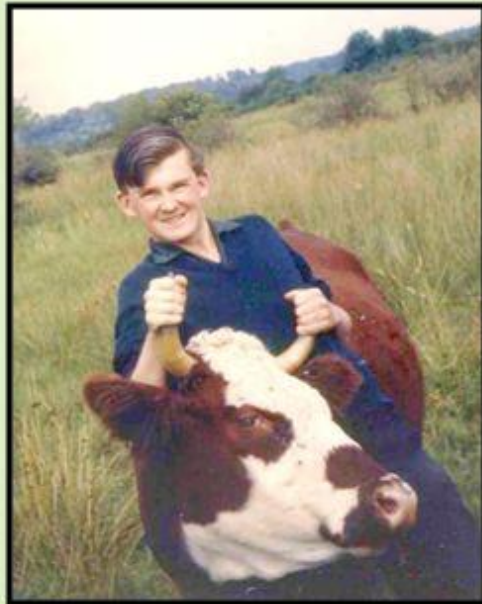


Memories of visits to
County Clare
1950-1966.



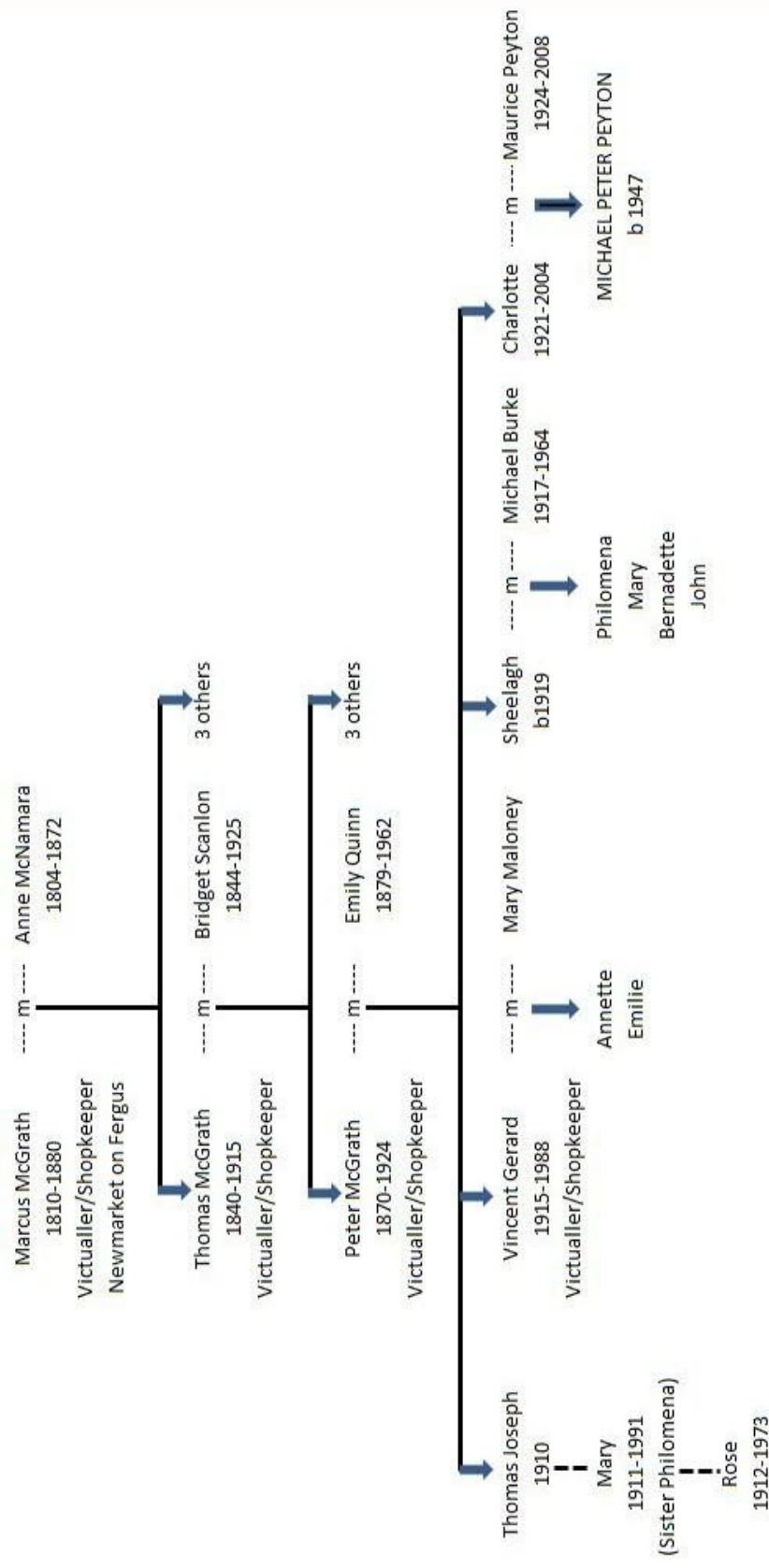
Michael Peyton

as told to

David W. Atherton

2012

The McGrath Family Tree



Michael Peter Peyton was born in Dublin on 1st March, 1947. His paternal ancestors originated from Cuilidoo, County Mayo, but his father, Maurice, had been born and brought up in Bradford, Yorkshire. Maurice went to Thurles then to Dublin as a young man, where he was apprenticed in pharmacy. He met his future wife, Charlotte, in the city where she had been working as a secretary with Kodak. They married in 1946.



**Peter McGrath, his mother Bridget; Rose, Vincent and Moira.
Outside the butchers, c 1919.**

Charlotte McGrath originated from Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare. Being born on 4th December 1921 she was the youngest of six children. Thomas Joseph had been born in 1910 and died in infancy; Moira was born in 1911, Rose in 1912, Vincent Gerard in 1915, Sheelagh in 1919. Charlotte's father, Peter, lived between 1870 and 1924. He was the third generation of his family to be described as a "victualler/shopkeeper", operating a general store and family butchers in Newmarket-on-Fergus. After his death, his widow, Emily, continued to run the business, later taken over by her son Vincent. Moira became a nun, taking the name Philomena. Vincent had gone some way towards entering the priesthood. Charlotte and Sheelagh had been boarders at a convent run by the Faithful Companions of Jesus at Laurel Hill, Limerick and whilst there learned the Irish language.

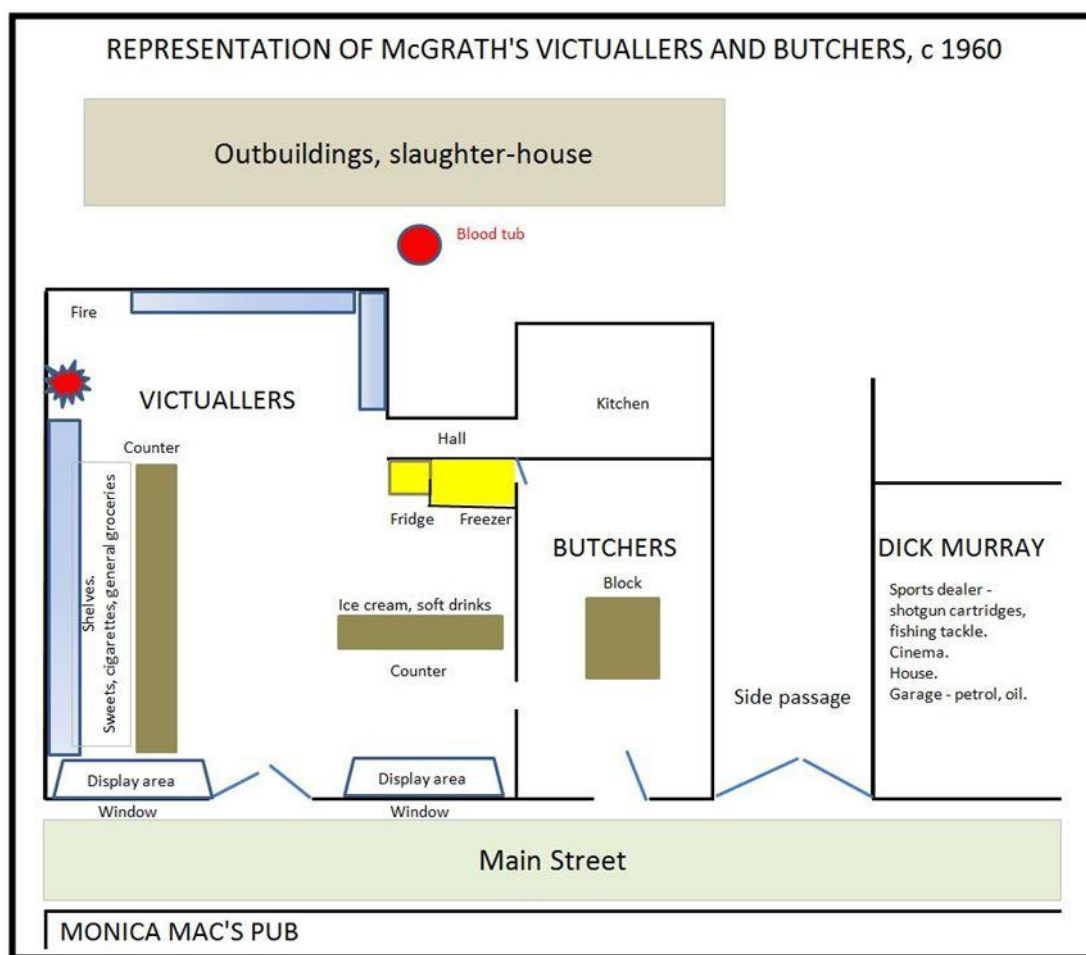
From his early years until his late teens Michael would accompany his mother to see his grandmother, uncle and aunts in Ireland on visits which would last between a fortnight and five weeks. During this time his family was living in England, initially in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire and later in Bradford. The odyssey involved a trip by air or ferry to Dublin. There they stayed with Aunty Rose in Kenilworth Park, three miles south of the city centre. She had a general store in Dundrum, a suburb six miles south of Dublin. In the short time there they would be entertained by visiting the horse show, and perhaps the zoo, the Irish Sweepstakes or Jacob's biscuit factory. From Dublin they would normally be driven by Aunty Rose to Portlaoise, there

transferring to a car driven by Auntie Sheelagh from Newmarket-on-Fergus. Mike and his mother were certainly made to feel welcome, indeed they were normally greeted by relatives, friends and villagers with the phrase “Welcome home.”

The “Topographical and General Survey of 1942/3” states that Newmarket-on-Fergus was home to about 550 souls and “*The village was clean on the outside, despite the fact that no sewerage system exists. There are no hotels or guest house accommodation.*” It had no important public buildings, parks or public gardens; two unsatisfactory pumps constituted the village’s public water supply. The Parochial Hall served as a Dance Hall for up to 250, housed a library and a social club. The streets did have the benefit of electric lighting. A cinema with a capacity for 350 people had the luxury of a flushing toilet. A weekly market was held on Wednesday. There were two garages stocking petrol and oil and which hired out “touring cars”. The railway station at Ballycar was just over a mile from the town.

Michael still recalls vividly the time spent in Newmarket-on Fergus, normally during the summer months occasionally at Easter and once at Christmas. The purpose of this short text is to set out his youthful recollections of these times. It is an account of faith, mischief, tranquillity, toil and simple pleasures.

The Peytons on their visits would stay either with Michael’s aunt Sheelagh, whose late husband, Michael, had run a taxi business, or his grandmother; following her death with his Uncle Vincent. The ground floor of the victualler’s was taken up chiefly by a grocery and butchers, with a living kitchen at the rear.



Clothes were dried by being placed on a wooden rack raised by a pulley to a position above an Aga cooker. Grandmother used to sit by the coal fire towards the back of the shop which enabled her to keep an eye on proceedings and pass the time of day with customers. In her later years she may instead decide to station herself by a window on the first floor which gave her the chance to survey village life. Further family accommodation was on this storey. The third floor was taken up chiefly with bedrooms, including one for Anthony Miller, the live-in slaughterman and butcher, and another for the domestic servant, known generally as “the maid”.

Maids were generally fairly young women from large farming families within the locality. Part of their recompense would be board and lodging. In exercising their duties, which involved some cooking and cleaning, they were supervised by Michael's grandmother. They would have a day a week off. In the process of picking up Michael and his mother travelling down from Dublin, one of the two maids employed by his grandmother and Auntie Sheelagh would be transferred to Rose's house for the duration of the Peyton's stay in Newmarket-on-Fergus. For country girls, the chance to live in the centre of Dublin for a while was a huge thrill. They would still have to be supervised as they went into the city centre.

Unfortunately, however, there were problems whenever young Michael went to Newmarket-on-Fergus in that after a short time he broke out in hives – raised, often itchy red welts on the surface of the skin. Michael's mother treated these by applying large amounts of calamine lotion. After putting up with this for some years his father, who worked in Boots in Chipping Norton, suggested that he should try Phenergan tablets. These seemed to be working but mid way through a long stay the supply was coming to an end and his father was asked to send more through the post. Some days elapsed but no tablets had arrived. The reason became clear when a letter was received from the Customs and Excise stating that they had intercepted some strange tablets. Explanations had to be provided before the medication was released. At the time, the family considered that the cause may have been the change of diet or the consumption of non-pasteurised milk. Michael now thinks that the problem may have arisen from drinking water straight from the village wells without it having undergone any purification.

When very young, Mike and his mother were visiting his grandmother and Uncle Vincent. Mike was wearing a new white suit for the occasion. He went round the back of the butchers which adjoined the main shop to watch the animals being killed. He backed away and fell into a tub containing a large quantity of blood collected for making black puddings. Sometimes Anthony Miller would cause him to flee by squeezing the contents of a beast's bladder at him.

The unwanted offal was placed in the yard behind the shop to be picked up by "the offal man". On one occasion a delay in collection led to the offal starting to rot which led to drastic measures being taken. With



Latoon Bridge.

Mike's help, Uncle Vincent loaded the offal into large bins, placed them in the car boot and the two of them went up to the river. They proceeded to dump the refuse into the River Fergus from Latoon Bridge off the Ennis Road, much to the annoyance of a fisherman who had been patiently pursuing his hobby. His angry shouts were met with a response from Uncle Vincent – *"Don't worry! We are only feeding the fish."* The two made their escape.

Uncle Vincent used to own fields at the far end of the village, where bullocks were kept for fattening. Some sheep were also kept there which had to be counted each morning and night to ensure that none had

strayed. Michael would help his family to herd the cattle and sheep along the road, stopping the traffic. One day, risking life and limb, he managed to bring down a fleeing bullock by grabbing its horns and winding his legs around its limbs, producing cheers from the locals. Normally the villagers had the good sense to close their doors when animals were being driven through the streets.

Living in a farming area, and especially staying with relatives who ran a victuallers and butchers, meant that the Peytons on their visits lived off good wholesome food. A full range of fresh meat was provided from the butchers, - high quality cuts of beef, lamb and pork. Every day fresh brown and white soda bread was made. Potatoes and other vegetables were pulled from the ground just prior to meals. Salmon and brown trout were provided from the local river. Bones were used to make into a broth which his grandmother used to

insist was consumed if they came in after an early morning outing. The leftovers were added to grain and fed to Sheelagh's chickens. At grandmother's a full Irish cooked breakfast was prepared but, if Michael wished to have breakfast in bed, a maid would bring him a lighter meal on a tray. He certainly did not go hungry on his Irish visits!

When Michael was with his cousins and their friends visiting relatives or at the end of a meal they may be asked to *"give us a turn"* or perhaps to *"go and get your fiddle"*. The youngsters then showed what they could do in the way of Irish dancing, singing, playing the fiddle or reciting poems. All were expected to contribute to this entertainment. For Michael this was very much an alien custom. He was very embarrassed and his offerings of *"Arabella had a woolly caterpillar"* and *"Incy Wincy Spider"* did not go down well. Eventually it was realised that he did not have a party piece and was left undisturbed.

Next to the family business Dick Murray owned a shop with a small bar to the rear, the village cinema and a garage next to the shop and house. The cinema had a tin roof. The more wealthy patrons would opt for tipping padded seats towards the back of the cinema. Those at the front simply sat on benches. Films were shown on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. The films, chiefly black and white, were picked up from Ballycar station and returned there for onward distribution. Michael used to help out in the cinema, tearing tickets and putting the seats back to position after the performance. He would help the projectionist to rewind and check the film which normally came on two spools. In the top right hand corner a dot would appear to indicate to the projectionist that the second reel should be started on the second projector to ensure continuity. Frequently the film broke, necessitating splicing, the delay in entertainment normally produced good-humoured booing and hissing.

Lots of country people came into the village to watch the films and this produced trade for the family's grocery shop. Michael used to serve on the lemonade and ice cream counter, taking particular care to ensure that ice cream blocks were cut to the correct size. The price of bottled pop was increased by a couple of pence, refundable on return. Meeting the urgent demands of the cinema crowd was a high-pressure job. During the day, occasionally, he would help at the main counter selling groceries. Casual customers, almost

always housewives, were normally asked *"What would you like Mrs?"* The more regular and monied customers would be referred to by their full name. Expectations of food hygiene were below our present standards. When a discontented woman spotted a wasp crawling under the cellophane wrapping of her cake Uncle belted it and exclaimed *"Now it's dead isn't it!"* In those days retailers like Uncle Vincent tended to buy items in bulk and then produce smaller quantities for customers to buy. Michael used to dread the arrival of a hundredweight sack of sugar since he would then have to spend a great deal of time scooping this up, weighing it on old-fashioned scales and putting it into two pound and four pound bags, all carefully folded. Sweets came in large bottles, the contents of which had to be weighted accurately to sell a quarter or half a pound for each customer. Pipe tobacco arrived in the form of a rope which needed to be cut appropriately if there were not to be complaints from elderly men. Some cigarette smokers could not afford to purchase twenty cigarettes so packets of ten cigarettes were produced and even these could be split up to allow smaller quantities to be bought.

Across the road from the shop was the telephone exchange, operated by Sean Keogh. If one of the few people who had a telephone wanted to make a call he or she would ring the Exchange, state the number and the appropriate plug would have



Uncle Vincent and his wife Mary.

to inserted to make the contact. It was, of course, possible for the Operator to listen in. Michael would “help out” on occasions, finding fun in making the wrong connection, causing whirring noises and engaging in general mischief.

Across the road from Aunty Sheelagh’s was one of the two farriers in the village, the other being at its other end. Since local farming practice involved a great deal of horse power the farrier was kept busy shoeing their horses. Michael would go across and watch the process. He blew the bellows to keep the fire glowing and watched with interest the skill of the farrier. He objected to the vile smell given off as a hot shoe burned its way on to the horse’s hoof.

As he entered his teenage years sometimes Michael would stay on at Aunty Sheelagh’s when his mother had



Michael's mother and Aunty Sheelagh.

returned to Bradford. Since his Aunty had to pick up tourists sometimes this meant that he had to deal with people coming to the door. Tinkers would appear from time to time, attempting to sell some small trinkets. They could easily be identified. Normally there was a woman wearing a shawl with a babe in arms, accompanied by a couple of urchins. The purchase of any item or the gift of a small sum of money would lead to a response of “*God bless you sir!*” Should a person say “*Be off with you!*” the result would be the uttering of a curse in the form of “*Bad cess to you!*” Being ignorant of the nature of this expression and being essentially polite, Michael would say “*And bad cess to you too!*” The tinker would then glower her displeasure and utter more obscenities.

As a mere visitor to Ireland, Michael was unaware of Irish politics and political figures. On one occasion he responded to a knock on the front door to find an elderly man accompanied by a small group of others campaigning for the Clare East election. The man asked to speak to his Aunty Sheelagh and Michael explained that she was out on business. The man asked Michael to tell Sheelagh that Mr de Valera had called. Michael said that he did not know who he was. In fact, in 1959 Éamon de Valera was the President of Ireland.

Naturally Sunday would involve attendance at mass in Sunday best, the family’s shoes having been carefully polished by the maid. A pony and trap would be used for the short journey up to the church near Newmarket House and parked with many others in the adjacent square. Inside the church the men would sit on one side and the women on another with family groups in the nave. Some families had bought their own pews. Normally the priest had to call some of the men in from outside to get mass underway.

When a death occurred in the village the locals called round to pay their respects to the deceased and the bereaved. Aunty Sheelagh, when a young woman, used to help with the laying out of the body. The corpse was dressed in a shroud, with a cross placed on the chest and the coffin surrounded by candles. Everyone who came into the house uttered “*I am sorry for your trouble.*” More traditional families would stop the clocks as a mark of respect. Such a death took place in Sixmilebridge during one of Michael’s stays in Newmarket-on-Fergus. He accompanied his uncle to a house and, on entering, was shocked to find a very old woman in an open coffin lying on the kitchen table. The women sat about her, saying the Rosary. The men were in another room and outside the house smoking, being sustained with some refreshment, recalling the woman’s life. Michael’s reaction to seeing the corpse was more marked since he noticed how white her face was. His uncle explained that the poorer families used flour to sprinkle on the face of the deceased to mask any pallor. The funeral procession would involve a horse-drawn hearse with family and friends walking slowly behind. Shopkeepers closed their businesses and put their shutters up. The villagers lined the streets. Men removed their hats and most bowed their heads and make the sign of the cross as the cortege passed.

CLARE CHAMPION

Recent Deaths *20-10-62*

MRS. EMILY McGRATH NEWMARKET-ON-FERGUS

The death took place on Saturday, October 13, at her home in Newmarket-on-Fergus, of Mrs. Emily McGrath, an old and respected business woman in the area for many years.

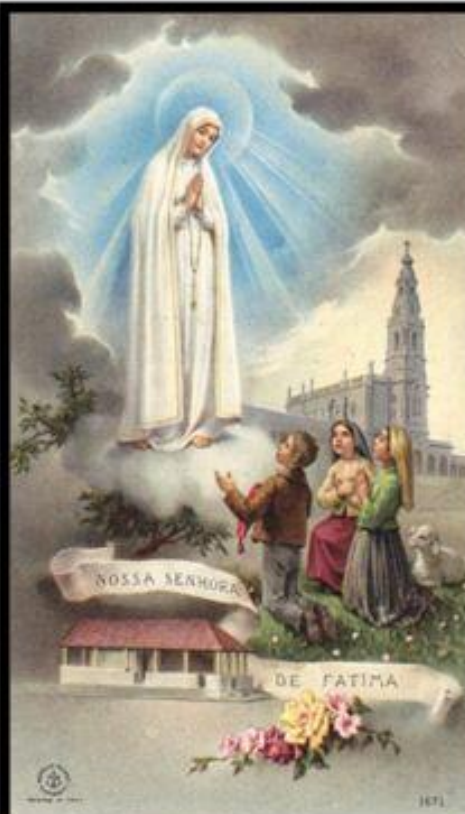
The late Mrs. McGrath was a lady of charming qualities, whose serene disposition endeared her to all who had the privilege of her friendship.

Relict of Peter McGrath, victualler, the late Mrs. McGrath was a widely known and popular figure in the area. Her kind and pleasing manner made her many friends and her passing was deeply regretted by her friends. The large attendance at the removal of the remains on Sunday evening and the funeral on the following morning was ample testimony to the high esteem in which she was held.

The remains were received by Rev. D. Woods, C.C., at Newmarket-on-Fergus Church and he was also celebrant of the Solemn Requiem Mass on Monday morning. Deacon was Rev. P. Clune, C.C., while Sub-Deacon was Rev. T. Comerford, C.C. Master of Ceremonies was Rev. P. Ryan, C.C., Ennis. The chanters were Rev. K. O'Gorman, Diocesan Director of Church Music, St. Flannan's College, Ennis, and Rev. D. Kelly, C.C., Doorra, and also present were Very Rev. J. Canon Cuddy, President, St. Flannan's College, and Very Rev. P. Barry, P.P., Newmarket-on-Fergus.

After Mass the burial took place at Kilnasoolagh cemetery.

The chief mourners were: Vincent (son); Sister Mary Philomena, Convent of Mercy, Ennis; Rose, Sheelah and Charlott (daughters); Patrick (brother); Sister Mary Frances, St. Paul, Minnesota (sister); Mrs. Mary McGrath (daughter-in-law), and Michael Burke and Maurice Peyton (sons-in-law), together with nieces, nephews and grandchildren.



Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us.



SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Have mercy on the soul of

EMILY McGRATH

NEWMARKET-ON-FERGUS

Who died on 13th October, 1862.

Aged 85 Years.

R. I. P.



Our Lady of Fatima, pray for us.

St. Anthony, pray for us.

Crucified Lord Jesus, have mercy on the souls in Purgatory.—7 years.

My Jesus, Mercy.—300 days.

O Compassionate Lord Jesus, grant her soul eternal rest.—7 years.

Sweet Heart of Mary, be my salvation.—300 days each time.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, I implore the grace to love Thee daily more and more.—300 days Indulgence.

Emily McGrath, obituary & Memorial Card.

Michael had attended a Catholic primary school in Chipping Norton and had become immersed in religious ritual. By the time he had moved to Bradford and was attending St. Bede's Grammar School he was increasingly contemplating entering the priesthood and was assisting in services.

On his visits to Clare he was surprised by the form in which religious belief was manifested. He found that most houses had a stoop of holy water at the front door to enable one to bless oneself when entering and leaving. A visitor would normally say "*God bless this house and all in it.*" Should a visitor omit to bless himself, the residents would sprinkle the holy water on the departing guest and utter a blessing. At noon

V. The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.
R. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with Thee;
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death. Amen*

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

R. Be it done unto me according to thy word.

Hail Mary, etc.

V. And the Word was made Flesh.

R. And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, etc.

V. Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

LET US PRAY

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection. Through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.

The Angelus.

"going to catch a mass". People would go to church on Sunday and feast days for Benediction. This involved the singing of certain hymns before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar and surrounded by candles. Uncle Vincent in particular had the habit of popping into a church and saying a decade of the Rosary. In his aunt's and uncle's houses a formal Grace was said before and at the end of meals. Elsewhere a family may bless themselves before eating and also at the end of the meal. The sign of the cross would indicate the formal end of the meal. In Vincent's house as bedtime approached the family would be brought together, including the maid. All would kneel down on the kitchen floor and say the Rosary. On the wall a small lamp flickered to illuminate a picture of the Sacred Heart.

The normal daily greeting in the street was "*God bless you!*" and any comment of a serious nature may well produce a response in the form of the sign of the cross and invoking the name of the Holy Family. Before the reforms following The Second Vatican Council the mass was always celebrated in Latin and the priest would have his back to the congregation. Many of the parishioners used to attend on a daily basis. Seeing some of the congregation saying the Rosary, almost ignoring the priest's words during mass, seemed strange to Michael. Altar boys would, however, respond in Latin as appropriate. He saw that when communicants knelt at the communion rail, an altar boy would hold a pattern under the chin of the recipient to ensure that none of the host was dropped. Mike became conscious of people wearing badges on their lapels which contained a picture of the Sacred Heart. Uncle Vincent explained that they were wearing what was known as a Pioneer Pin to show that they were members of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, commonly called Pioneers. The group, founded in the late nineteenth century encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart as an aid to resisting the temptation of alcohol. The pin would indicate to others not to make an offer of alcohol.

In short the extent and manifestation of piety exceeded anything he had experienced within the Catholic community in England.

each day and six p.m. the church bell would ring out the Angelus.

This was a signal for daily life to stop and prayer to begin in memory of the Incarnation. In the fields, the farm workers would remove their caps, make a sign of the cross and recite the Angelus. In the family shop, serving would cease while staff and customers made their brief devotions. The car too contained holy water which was sprinkled on the passengers before departure and all would participate in saying the Rosary while travelling. When travelling, for example to Spanish Point, the drive may be halted at a holy well where a prayer would be said.

Masses were held in various churches at different times and the relatives may disappear, explaining that they were

There was a boureen (a track) behind the village used by courting couples. The parish priest was fond of using this route for his daily exercise, carrying with him a walking stick. When he spotted a courting couple behind a bush he would strike it vigorously and shout *"Get out and get home!"* The priest, who would have known the younger population since birth, would have found it easy to identify those coming to his church to confess their sins. Anyone desiring anonymity could seek absolution by going to Ennis or Limerick whichever was more convenient. Normally, of course, when the priest was encountered in the street, a man would tip his hat and say *"Good day father"*. (Mike's paternal grandfather used to say *"If you see a priest or a peeler coming towards you, cross to the other side of the road."*)

Michael did not spend all his time in Clare in Newmarket-on-Fergus. There were sometimes lengthy journeys to Galway or Waterford. On a couple of occasions he would visit "the Country Cousins". These were his grandmother's brother, Patrick, his wife Mossie and their children. They lived about five miles away on a farm at Clonmoney, Bunratty, with the Shannon estuary visible from the farm window. There they had afternoon tea and shortly afterwards Michael would disappear with his young relatives to play in the haystack and orchard.



**Sister Philomena, Sister Paul, Charlotte Peyton and Michael
Convent of Mercy, Ennis, 1949.**

Sometime during their stay Michael, his mother and Auntie Sheelagh used to go to see Moira, who was professed as a nun in 1935 taking the name of Philomena. Initially she was a teacher at a convent in Ennis then Reverend Mother at Spanish Point, Miltown Malby. Normally they would be invited for afternoon tea in the nuns' parlour. A majestic spread was produced including soda bread, butter in pats, fresh jam, lemon curd, freshly baked fruit cake, scones and cream, with the table properly set out with linen napkins and fine crockery. Sometimes they would be shown round the school. At both convents they would walk round the grounds. At Spanish Point the nuns had a kitchen garden growing all manner of fruit and vegetables,



Sister Frances, February 1964.

shielded from Atlantic blasts by a large wall. Sometimes instead of partaking of refreshments at the convent they would have a picnic on a nearby beach, eating food from a hamper provided by Sheelagh.

Michael hated such occasions since sand used to get in the sandwiches leading him to wander off so as to find a suitable spot to bury his food. Sand also seemed to find its way into the ice creams purchased from a rudimentary shop nearby. Merely walking alone on the empty beach at Spanish Point was pleasurable. More active outings involved playing golf in Lahinch and Shannon. sometimes alone but in later years with Madeline, the sister in law of Uncle Vincent.

Auntie Sheelagh lived in the village not far from the family shop. There were chickens at the bottom of the garden which always ensured a supply of fresh eggs, and also a beehive for honey. One visit to Sheelagh's coincided with the stay of great-aunt Sister Frances, his grandmother's sister, a member of the Bethany Convent in Minnesota, U.S.A. on a rare homecoming. She had been born in Sixmilebridge in 1877 as Anne Marie Quinn. She sailed from Queenstown to New York on 29th June, 1913 on the S.S. Campania, taking with her \$50. She kept in touch with events in her home town by her nephew

Vincent sending copies of the local newspaper, "The Clare Champion". An impish lad, Michael decided to insert the family cat into the toilet bowl which made its escape only when the lid was opened by the elderly nun. This event is still burned into family memory.

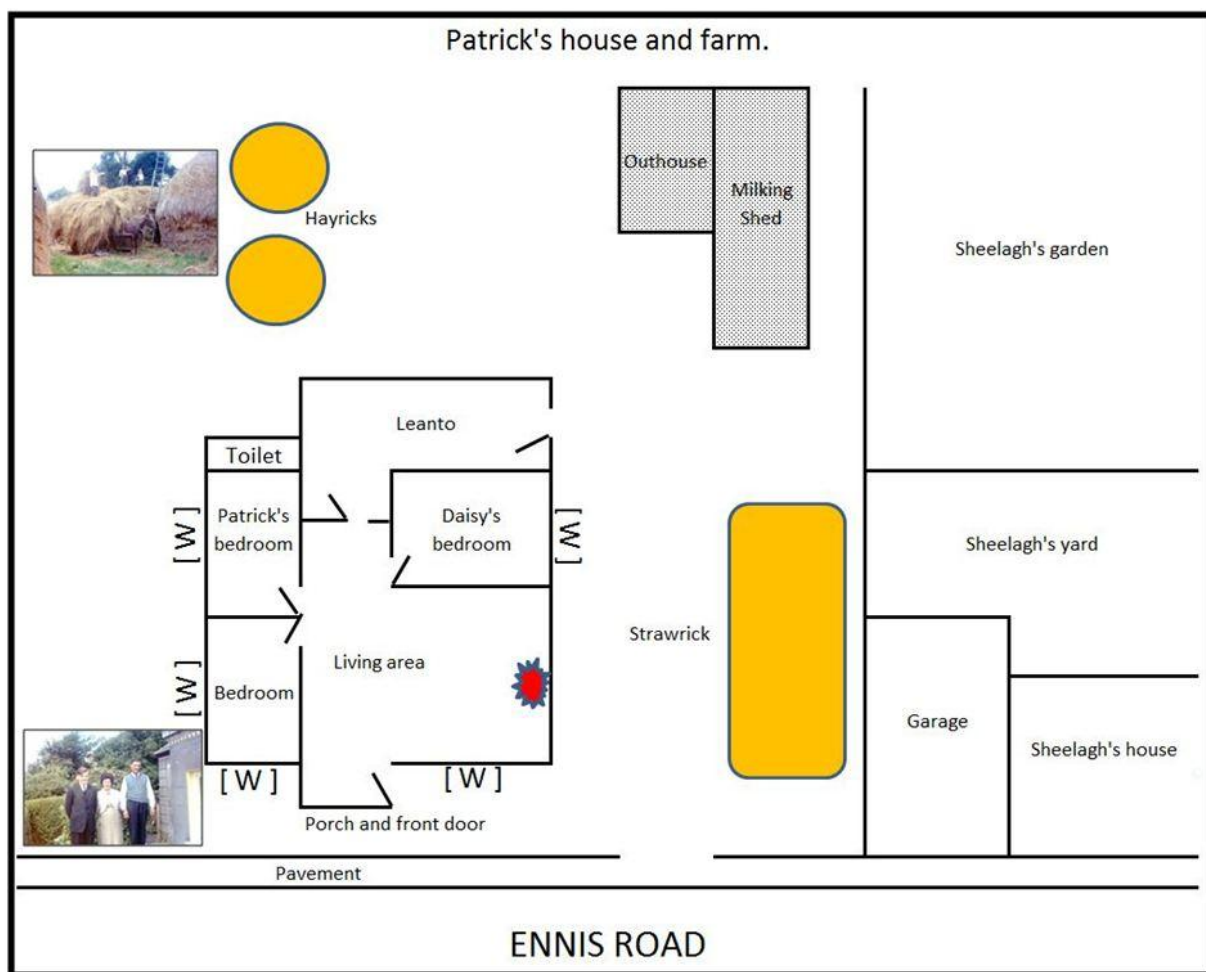


Grandmother and Auntie Sheelagh at Lisdoonvarna.

Michael recalls during some summers travelling with his grandmother Emily and Mossie Quinn to Lisdoonvarna staying in the rather quaint Sheedy's Hotel and "taking the waters". On grandmother's return, Uncle Vincent would have a week's break there. The location was a great place for match-making, attracting eligible young people from a wide area. Young Michael took some convincing that the horrid mineral-rich water was actually good for him, or anyone.

At the back of her house were fields and a small farm where Michael spent much of his time. He would go out of the back door, cross a large concrete yard with a sizeable garage to house taxis. He climbed a fence five feet tall and so got access to the farm. The farm house itself took the form of a bungalow, now demolished, in which lived Patrick McNamarra, his sister Daisy and her daughter Marian, who was a couple of years older than Mike. Patrick had been an all-Ireland hurler. Inside was the kitchen, an all-purpose room where the family sat, cooked and took their meals. Of course there was no television during the earlier years of Michael's visits. The room had a vaulted ceiling on to which were nailed palms, one for every year the family had been there. There was a turf fire at one end, a primitive cooker with hot plates. The dining table was covered with a plastic cloth. Daisy used to cook

all the meals and Michael was often invited to join them. Cabbage, bacon and potatoes were the staple fare. The potatoes, Kerr's Pinks, were always boiled in their jackets and had to be peeled before being eaten; a skill which took some time to acquire.



Michael would have helped Patrick to dig these potatoes from one of his fields. Any not used by the family were bagged and sold. Irish stew, bread and butter and jam also appeared on the table.

There was a toilet out at the back of the house. In the farmyard were some basic sheds; the milking parlour, which could accommodate half a dozen cows, was fabricated from breeze blocks. Nearby were two large ricks drawn on to feed the cattle in winter. The cattle were brought in each morning and evening for milking, in the process delaying traffic along the Ennis-Limerick road. Milking, of course, was carried out by hand, with Patrick sitting on a three legged stool with his cap turned round. When he had finished he used some of the milk from each cow to make a sign of the cross on the rear of the beast, a sign of thanksgiving for the divine bounty. If Mike approached the farmer during his work he found the cow's teat directed towards him. Patrick showed Michael how to milk, a skill in which he never became truly proficient.

Daisy would put some of the milk into a large pail kept in the front porch. This was drunk by the family without being pasteurised and some was sold to neighbours who came with cans into which the milk was ladled. Daisy would let the milk settle until cream came to the top of the container, then transfer the cream into an earthen bowl leaving behind skimmed milk. After the cream became "soured" it was placed in a small churn kept in the porch and a little salt was added. The churn was turned until blobs of butter were formed and these were patted into a block for use by the family. The residual buttermilk was used to make soda bread. The milk which was not sold from the porch or used by the family was put into churns and taken by horse and cart to the local creamery on Loughash Road for pasteurisation. Michael and the farmer would queue up to dispose of their milk, taking an opportunity to gossip with other members of the local farming community whilst waiting. Sometimes the villagers would go to the creamery for their own small can of fresh cream.



Michael, Daisy and Patrick.

One summer in the early 1960s Mike witnessed the birth of a calf. Patrick knew when the calf was due and so the cow was brought into a shack by the milking shed. This had been carefully cleared out and disinfected, with straw put down to make the cow comfortable. One evening as the time for birth neared, the cow started to make loud bellowing noises. Mike was alerted. Hot soapy water was prepared. Patrick inserted his hand into the cow and tried to help calf emerge. He placed a rope around the calf's legs and he instructed Mike to hold one end and both pulled gently until the calf emerged. Patrick lifted the calf to its mother who licked it clean. The cow stood up and the calf gradually found its feet. Patrick ensured that the calf took some of its mother's milk and kept an eye on cow and calf throughout the night. Mike later used to feed the calf from a pail containing its mother's milk.



Mike, Patrick and Frank McNamara in Patrick's farmyard.

Patrick rented land near Ing in order to grow hay. When Michael arrived in Ireland in mid to late July the hay had generally been cut in the field by means of a scythe. Patrick was reluctant to let Michael use a scythe, viewing this as being far too dangerous for a youth. Only when he had reached the age of about seventeen was he allowed to have a try but even then it was under close supervision. Failure to use the scythe properly led to his being called “a gombeen”, which he found out meant a stupid or ignorant person. The scythes were made by the local blacksmith and tended to be personalised to suit the physique of the user. They had



Sput the sheepdog.

to be sharpened each day before use and often during the course of the day by means of stones picked up from the field. Once cut the hay was left in the fields to dry but periodically it would have to be turned to permit thorough drying. Initially the turning involved manual work with a pitchfork but later a mechanical device pulled by a horse could turn and gather the hay into bundles. Patrick would arrange the bundles into stooks five to six feet high, dotted around the field. These would then be left for a couple of weeks to dry out. Once dry a cart pulled by Rose, the horse, would be taken out from Newmarket-on-Fergus by Patrick and Michael to collect the hay. The four miles distance was such that at most only two trips a day could be made. If any woman was encountered along the road, Patrick would raise his cap to her. Michael has learned how to put the tackle on the horse and Patrick showed him how to drive the cart, eventually allowing him to take charge when travelling along the main roads. Patrick's Alsatian, Rex, and sheep dog, Sput, (named after the recently launched “Sputnik”) trotted alongside the cart on its journey. If not driving, Michael used to love burrowing inside the load on its return trip. When a load was brought back to Newmarket-on-Fergus, Patrick and Michael would start to build a large rick with Mike standing on the cart and forking it up to the farmer. Many helpers were available, the children of Patrick's brothers.

As it became larger, the two of them would jump on the top to compress the material and rake the sides to produce the correct shape. To make it fairly waterproof, it was finished off by being made into a cone with a tarpaulin over the top. It was tied down with ropes made from the hay. This was strenuous work. Doing farm work throughout the entire year had made Patrick extremely strong, despite his fairly small frame. Sometimes Daisy would cycle out to Ing, bringing refreshments in the form of fruitcake, bread and butter but they normally tried to arrange the day so as to have a meal at the farmhouse. The whole process would take three or four weeks. The hay provided fodder for the cows in the winter. Feeding the animals in this way allowed the farmer to monitor the health of his beasts.

Prior to the Peytons' arrival in Ireland Patrick would have rented a small area of bog off the Ballycar road and begun to dig ditches several feet in depth, using a special tool to remove turf in the form of large block. The ditch would become waterlogged and the turf was piled up by the side of the excavation to dry out. Once the hay making had been completed, he would take Michael and his nephew to collect the turf, sometimes using a donkey cart instead of the usual horse and cart. Mike would help him to load the cart; he found the turf blocks pleasant to handle with a good odour. The dogs accompanied them and the sheep dog in particular used to like being dropped into the water-logged ditch. Patrick was less keen to see this pursuit since it delayed the loading operation. The load was brought back to the farm yard for storage and brought in to be burned when necessary, being kept in the house in a turf bucket. The turf gave off a lovely sweet smell but the smoke did discolour the palms nailed to the beams. Periodically, if Michael was in the kitchen he would be asked to “*Put another sod on the fire!*”

After the hay crop had been dealt with, in late summer it was time for the oat harvest to be gathered. Some came from a field in Ing. A horse-drawn cutter was used and the oats put into stooks, and groups of about six

were formed into a wigwam shape for drying. Patrick monitored the state of the oats by rubbing the ears between his hands to determine if the grain would separate.

At an appropriate time, the bundles were pitchforked into the cart drawn by Rose, ensuring that the ears of pointed outwards. Patrick joined with a number of small local farmers and hired a threshing machine which went round to each farm in turn to thresh the crop, separating the grain from the chaff. The resulting grain was bagged up and sold for milling. Threshing was a co-operative effort and while the threshing machine was on a farm, the local men would be given a meal, often of bacon and cabbage followed by apple pie, all washed down with a large quantity of tea. While being so sustained, inevitably there would be considerable discussion of local farming matters and village gossip. The threshing process was very dusty and often went on as long as daylight lasted. One night, after threshing, Michael went to bed and found that he could not open his eyes in the morning. He thought that he had gone blind. The grain dust had combined with the moisture around his eyes to form a paste. His mother managed to free his eyelids after careful bathing.

Patrick worked extremely hard throughout the year in dairying, haymaking, turf gathering and harvesting. He also grew potatoes and vegetables from small plots nearer the village centre. He had the skill to become involved in other activities, one of these was assisting his brother to build a bungalow along the Limerick Road, a project in which Michael also had a hand. Patrick looked forward to his day off on Sunday, expressed in the phrase *"Come day, go day, God send Sunday."* Even on Sunday though he had to be up at six a.m. to do the milking.

The farmers going along the roads in their horses and carts would often meet and have a chat, totally ignoring the build up of car traffic behind them. Their normal initial comment would be *"Soft day"*, an expression which implies an overcast day, with drizzle. This puzzled Michael since the same words were used no matter what the weather. The road through Newmarket-on-Fergus was quite popular with tourists from America and England who had hired cars from the airport. It was quite easy for them to get lost. One farmer followed a well-rehearsed routine when asked for directions. When called over he would say in an exaggerated Irish accent *"Yessir. You go in, and you go down, and you go out. A fine day to you sir."* He would then tip his cap to the inquirer and go on his way leaving the tourist to ponder the significance of information given.



Charlotte Peyton and Sister Philomena at Spanish Point.

Patrick was on good terms with the local sergeant of the Garda. The sergeant had an important function in relation to the disposal of dogs since he possessed a gun. If someone wished to have his dog put down because of distemper or old age the sergeant would be summoned and the dog humanely destroyed. Michael, however, had pestered Patrick to ask the sergeant to allow him to have a look round the police station, a large building painted a sandy yellow, near Aunty Sheelagh's. This was eventually arranged. They showed him the cell with a wooden door, peep hole and bench. They locked the door with Michael inside "to make it more realistic" and then disappeared. He started to panic, banged at the door and wanted to be let out. They pretended not to hear him and the panic increased. He was glad to be released after a few minutes which felt far longer. His next visit to a cell was when he spent quite some time trying to teach prisoners in Walton Jail, Liverpool. He felt some sympathy for them!

During the summer there used to be a village shows where prize vegetables could be displayed. There were contests to identify the best cake and scones, best vegetable or piece of embroidery. Rosettes were awarded to the winners. A larger scale event took place at Ennis. One of Mike's cousins had started to take an interest in riding and she used to be involved in junior jumping contest. Mike used to accompany her when she went for lessons at a riding centre in Ballycar. Sometimes when official tuition was over Mike was given riding instruction but only with the less demanding horses. He did however learn to trot, canter, and gallop. Back in Newmarket-on-Fergus Mike used to ride Rose. Since Patrick did not possess any saddle for her he put an old potato bag on her back, held in place by a piece of string. While riding at pace around Turret Hill he managed to fall off.

Michael and his mother usually found themselves visiting one of the upmarket hotels or tourist centres in the area, in some cases taking his aunt and cousins as a thank you gesture for their hospitality. Bunratty Castle staged medieval nights for tourists coming from Shannon and sometimes Michael would go down to watch the entertainment. Some of the villagers from Newmarket-on-Fergus were involved in these proceedings, playing the part of performers, wenches and serving men. In 1962 Dromoland Castle had been sold by Lord Inchiquin to an American citizen for conversion into an elaborate hotel. Since Patrick had contacts with some of the contractors he was able to take Michael along to visit the site while the work was underway. President George W. Bush was to stay here in 2004, a visit which necessitated protection by a very large security team.



Sheelagh, Vincent and Rose, Shannon International Airport, 1966.

Michael liked going behind the road behind Shannon Airport which allowed spectators to get within a short distance of the jets as they prepared for take-off and headed down the runway. Often he went into the terminus. His Aunty Sheelagh was well known at the airport owing to her taxi business which had a stand there. Her vehicles would take passengers to Limerick and Galway and sometimes they were hired for a week to allow American visitors to tour Ireland. Once Michael had learned to drive he was sometimes pressed into service, providing a not very accurate commentary as he drove along. Movement within the airport complex then was relatively easy. While having refreshments he found it interesting to observe

whole families arrive, full of emotion to watch someone depart to America or welcome someone home after an interval of many years.

On one of his trips home he caught the plane from Shannon to Dublin. He was seen off at the airport by his two aunts and uncle. The plane he boarded had come in from the U.S.A. and evidently a large number of meals had been served en route. One of the cabin crew had failed to secure the compartments containing the trays from which the meals had been served. As the plane took off and banked sharply, the entire contents of the compartments were voided. The loud crash gave some concern to those who did not know its cause. Mike, who was sitting nearby, found great amusement in the incident, but he did attempt to assist in the clearing-up process.

It is obvious that Michael as a boy and young man found his trips to Clare to be a delightful experience. The environment in which he found himself was totally different from that of his English home, especially when the Peytons had moved from Oxfordshire to the large, grimy industrial city of Bradford. He was welcomed into his mother's family, one that was well known, well respected and relatively prosperous. His recollections perhaps give too rosy a view of life in Newmarket-on-Fergus for the majority of villagers at that time. Michael established a very firm friendship with Patrick McNamara and his family and he did his fair share of heavy work on Patrick's farm. This, however, was during the pleasant summer months. For farming families toil, even in the depths of a wet winter, would have been needed to achieve even a modest standard of living. When dressed in his Sunday best, Patrick's hands show that he is a man accustomed to hard manual labour.



Michael the farm labourer.

The impression which he gained and which he has conveyed here was that Newmarket-on-Fergus was generally a stable and contented community, with extremely strong family ties. What has come through these tales is the dominant role of the Catholic church and religion. Faith was not an adjunct; it was the bedrock of existence for the majority, if not all, of the population.

Had Mike been visiting Newmarket-on-Fergus in the early twentieth century rather than fifty years later he would have found a way of life little different from the one which he experienced. In the fifty or so years since Mike made his visits huge changes have occurred. Inevitably the passage of time has meant that many of the people, both family and friends, who Michael knew so well have died. The village has expanded as new families have moved in. Patrick McNamara's farm has been built upon. Communications have improved.

The building which housed McGraths "Victuallers" is now the "Shannonside Clinic", still operated by a member of the McGrath family, as indicated by a large doormat showing the family name. With greater mobility, educational opportunities, economic growth and general exposure to the wider world, the simple life which Michael experienced has largely gone.

Nothing has been more affected than the church and the Catholic faith. When Mike's great uncle Marcus McGrath, a priest at Clarecastle, Co. Claire, died the "*Sunday Record and Clare Journal*" of December 8th, 1928 reported his funeral. This was presided over by "His Lordship, the Most Reverend Dr. Fogarty, Lord Bishop of Killaloe" and was attended by almost ninety priests from the area. The Angelus is still rung from the churches, perhaps electronically, and is heard daily on RTÉ but fewer react to it. Fundamental changes have taken place following the Second Vatican Council in both liturgy and attitudes. The mass is no longer in Latin. The church has been weakened by self-inflicted wounds and it faces a crisis of recruitment of trainee priests. In 2003, Dr Vincent Twomey, a priest and theologian from Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth wrote "*The End of Irish Catholicism?*". Here Twomey notes how being Catholic is no longer a '*badge of honour*.' Instead, "*in the upwardly mobile, modern Ireland south of the border, it is more often than not an embarrassment to be reluctantly admitted.*" This statement may be too strong to be applied to the people of Newmarket-on-Fergus, especially to those from the older generation.

Michael, after studying Philosophy and Theology, entered teaching and eventually became a Deputy Head Master of a comprehensive school. In 2012 he lives in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk with his son Michael. Unfortunately his wife Joan died some years ago

In 1973, towards the start of his teaching career, he joined the staff of Upholland Grammar School



R.A. Fitzgerald Studdert.

Lancashire. There he met David Atherton, to whom he has recounted these tales. Interestingly, ten years earlier a person from a venerable Clare family had retired from the School, Richard Augustine Fitzgerald Studdert where, from the early 1950s, he had taught Latin. He was a man a great intellect and learning who was not always able to convey understanding and love of the Classics to his charges. He was, however, a great raconteur, able to entertain and bewitch his classes with tales of Clare. Apparently when staying overnight at a house of the gentry, the custom was to be awakened in the morning by a maid carrying a large glass of whiskey, known as an "eyeopener". He maintained his liking for a Jameson throughout his life. Both he and Mike are remembered by their pupils with great affection.

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