

FR. PETER CONEFREY & The Cloone Ceilí Band

by OLIVER O'HIGGINS



Fr. Peter Conefrey took up duty in Cloone in April of 1933 to replace Fr. Deniston who had died in February of the same year. When he arrived in Cloone he was still feeling the effects of an accident which occurred in his previous parish of Dromard and it was some months before he was able to move freely without the aid of crutches. He resumed his usual schedule the following November when he attended a Gaelic League Convention in Mohill. The main purpose of the meeting was to complete plans for a large anti-jazz demonstration to be held in Mohill in January 1934. Fr. Conefrey very much saw modern forms of music such as jazz, as a serious threat to traditional Irish music and he strove to rally the people to rise against

this emerging threat. This campaign actually went national from Fr. Conefrey's initiation and is the subject of a separate chapter in this book by Shane Tiernan, native of the village, whose father was in attendance at the rally and recorded an account of the event.

Fr. Conefrey's appointment to Cloone as Parish Priest was truly a God send with regard to Irish traditions and music. He motivated the people, the musicians, the dancers and all the parishioners to a truly Irish way of life, and a willingness of involvement in everything Irish. He worked perpetually to revive the language and music of Ireland. With a deep respect and commitment for an all encompassing Irish way of life in all its forms, no stone was



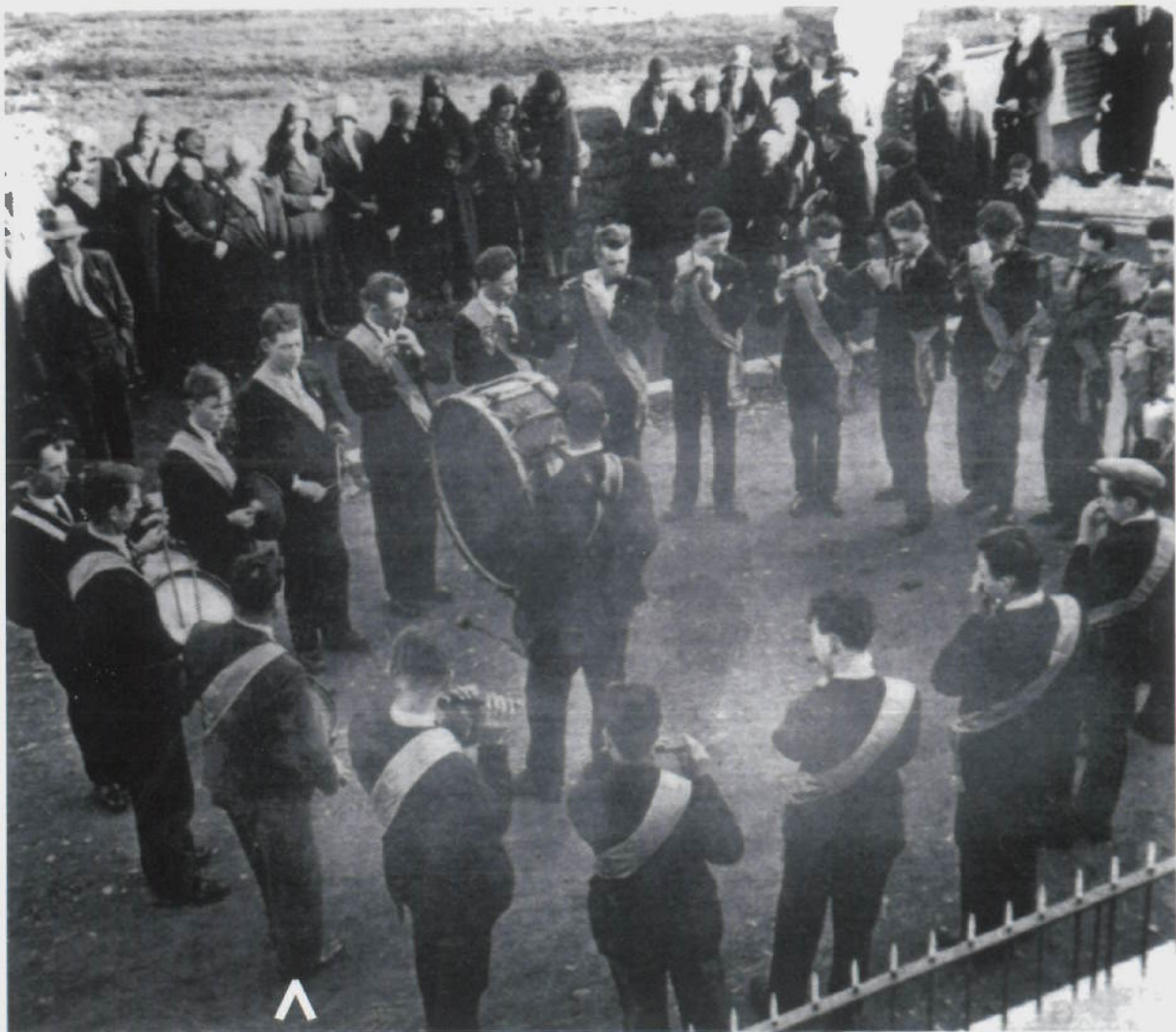
Cloone Ceilí Band pictured at RTE studios. Back: William Doherty, James 'Sonny' Pope, Jimmy McKiernan, James (Black) Pope, Fr. Peter Conefrey, friend of Fr. McGarry, Jack Rourke, Fr. McGarry. Front: Michael M. Creegan, Leo Rowsome, Sonny Canning.

left unturned to stimulate the community in fostering Irish traditional ways of life.

A timber hall locally known as 'The Hut' was erected where the school now stands, where all the cultural, musical and traditional values took place. Concerts, plays and dances were held and there was a kitchen at the rear of the stage in the Hut where boxty making, porridge making, churning, spinning, knitting and many other domestic traditions took place.

For the ladies he organised spinning classes and garment making as he had done in his previous parishes of Killoe and Dromard. For the men he formed both a Fife and Drum Band and a Ceilí Band, both of which played a major role in all the parish activities spearheaded by Fr. Conefrey.

Fr. Peter organised dancing classes in Cloone and an old Irish Dance called 'The Breakdown' was revived. The dance



Cloone Fife and Drum Band 1933. Clockwise from arrow: Johnny Mitchell, Cloone, Eugene Murray (Annaghmacoolen), Jack Rourke (Cloone), Charlie McGowan (Clooneen), Pee McHugh (Drumhallagh), Jim Mc Hugh (Drumhallagh), Pat Frank Lyons (Annaghmacoolen), Patsy McGowan (Cloonen), Pat Kilkenny (Drumhallagh), Tommy McDermott (Drumhallagh, postman), Berney Kilkenny, (Kiltyfea), Michael Gaffney (Sunnaghenerity), Albert Kelly (Cornulla), John Doherty (Streamstown), Paddy Joe Reilly (Drumdarkin), John McKeon (Drimna), Sonny Colreavy, (Drumhallagh), John Joe Mitchell (Gortnaloughra), Mickey Kilkenny (Drumhallagh), Owen Mitchell (Cloone), 'Big' Jim McHugh (Drumhallagh). Drummer in centre is Charlie 'Lawlor' Kilkenny (Clooneen).

resembled the four hand reel and was presented by the new dancing troupe before a capacity audience at a concert in the Canon Donohoe Hall, Mohill in March 1934. He also organised music sessions in the parochial house where local musicians came and played and in a short time the nucleus of the famous Cloone Ceilí Band was established. It was a great honour for Fr. Peter and his band to be invited to audition for 2RN Radio Eireann in December 1934. The broadcasting Station had only opened in February of the previous year. The band made history on St. Patrick's day 1935 when they broadcast over Radio Eireann. Members of the Ceilí Band in 1935 were Michael M. Creegan, Leo Rowsome, Thomas Canning, William Doherty, Jimmy McKiernan, Jack Rourke and further down the line other musicians joined with Peter Fitzpatrick, Charlie Heslin and J. P. Blessing in around 1938.

In 1935 Fr. Peter was appointed Chairman of the County Executive of the Gaelic League and the organisation had an able secretary in Peadar O'Giofa. Fr. Conefrey was a member of the County Vocational Education Committee and was later to be honoured with the position of Chairman. During his association with this body he continually pleaded that the Vocational Schools' course should be geared more towards farming training and he also campaigned for the setting up of spinning classes for the students of the schools. Spinning classes were later introduced.

Fr. Conefrey had a remarkable energy and he never relaxed in his efforts to put forward schemes to improve the conditions of Leitrim farmers.

In the economic field Fr. Peter persuaded the County Committee to appoint a butter making and poultry keeping instructor in the county. This appointment gave him a feeling

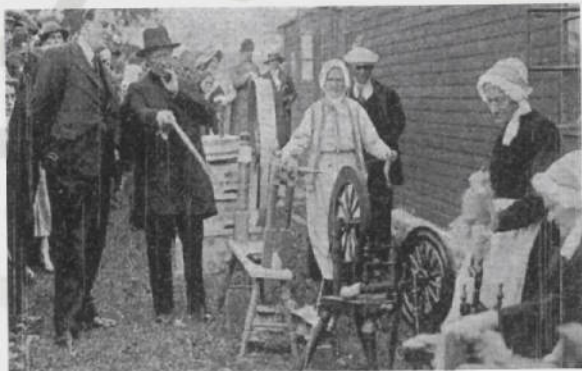
of great satisfaction as he had plans in mind for marketing butter.

The year 1935 marked the start of the Economic War and like World War 1 it caused much hardship to the people of rural Ireland. The annual Cloone fairs of 26th May and the 13th June were depressed and the fair of the 5th April was no longer being held. Fr. Conefrey aspired to lift the people and in June 1935 he held the first Cloone Aeriocht and it was an outstanding success. It attracted a very large crowd including groups of performers from Dromard and Killoe as well as supporters. This was followed with a great Cloone Feis in 1936 which was an unforgettable day in the annals of Cloone history. The Feis was opened by Roddy the Rover, Irish Press Columnist. Before the actual opening there was a wonderful parade through the village. Participants lined up at Dillons Cross and marched through the village led by the famous Dublin 'Fintan Lawlor Pipe Band'. Other bands who took part were Ballinamore, Cloone, Aughavas and Drumshanbo

On the arts stage there were the musicians, singers and dancers storytellers and Ceilí bands from all over the county playing and entertaining the huge crowd.

At the industrial section of the Feis the various traditional manufacturing processes were displayed. These included:

- Flax scutching, hackling, spinning, samples of homespun and hand-woven linen, mill bleached, home bleached and unbleached.
- Wool carding - samples of hand-woven, knitted and crocheted home-spuns.
- Wicker-work - making reed baskets and creels.
- Straw - making of straw articles and straw mats.
- Corn —old time quern corn grinding



Flax Spinning at Cloone Feis in 1930's.

Rev Peter Conerfrey PP and "Roddy the Rover" watch the flax spinners at Cloone Feis along side the Parish Hall known as The Hut

Local spinners, weavers and knitters displayed their art to all attending

Then there was the language stage where you could not ascend unless you were pledged to speak the native tongue. Irish speakers who were qualified were presented with the Fainne by Peadar O'Maille of Dublin and the stage music when called was played by an old Irish Speaking Band from Keshcarrigan. For the language stage local teacher Master P. Kilkenny composed a special Irish song extending a cead mile failte to all who came to Cloone. It was sung by Miss Duggan to an old O'Carolan air. Even the arts stage had its own Ceili bands - three in number Cloone, Kilnaleck and Keshcarrigan.

The feis also provided sporting entertainment in football with Cloone playing Kiltubrid and camogie teams from Mohill and Manorhamilton all playing for a set of medals. The games were refereed through the medium of Irish.

And of course for those requiring a rest there was a refreshment area where you could sit down and take a traditional lunch of hot boxty and tea.

These feiseanna were continued for many years and were a tribute to Fr. Peter's

philosophy of traditional entertainment and home industry.

Fr. Peters programme was to make the household self sufficient. In his own house he set the example of what he believed proper food should be. Boxty, Sowans, (scones) Oaten Bread, Flummery, Stirabout (Porridge). He also had his own supply of eggs. His housekeeper churned the milk and homemade butter was always on the table. Each winter he had a pig killed and if you visited his house in November you would see the home cured bacon hanging from the rafters. Soon Cloone became famous for its boxty and newspaper columnists came to see his rare type of food being made. Cloone became the boxty capital of Ireland, something he was very proud of and it is still synonymous with the village even today. Fr. Peter was proud of the 'Boxty Cloone' label and defended it vehemently. At a football match between Cloone and Mohill when the opposition supporters began to chant 'Boxty Cloones' he rallied the Cloone contingent to shout back 'Spongecake Mohills'! On another occasion he read out that he received a letter from a Dublin lady who appeared to be making a joke of his efforts and slandered the boxty by asking how much cement goes into the making of boxty? His quick reply was that this lady obviously knew only about powder puff and nothing of wholesome food!

In August 1936 he invited the Franciscans to set up a branch of the Third Order in the parish. The Third order was lay organisation for those devoted to the ideals of St. Frances, and a member of the order was called a Tertiary. Fr. Peter had been a Tertiary from the time of his ministry in Athlone. The Franciscans always conducted the Cloone parish mission, and it was after a retreat of spring 1936 that a request was made to have a branch set up locally. When the enrolment

took place almost 200 people joined. While in Cloone Fr. Peter also had a branch of the Pioneer Association established. In his time Fr. Peter purchased a marble altar for his church to replace a wooden one that had been there for many years. He also purchased a rectory and a farm in the Glebe for £750 pounds to be used as a curate's resident.

1937 will be remembered as the year in which Dr. Hyde was elected President of Ireland and also the year our new constitution was drafted. Cloone was once again a hive of activity. The New Year had just begun when Cloone was to feature in another broadcast on Radio Eireann. The broadcast was this time relayed from McLoughlin's at Main Street Ballinamore. As on the occasion of previous broadcasts the event was eagerly awaited and with an average of only one radio set to each townland, the demand for chair space was intense in the particular kitchens who were privileged to possess radio sets, particularly since the programme was of local interest. Listeners heard the familiar voice of Fr. Conefrey explaining the nature of his work and his achievements to-date as well as his plans for the future. Then part 1 of the programme was ushered in with the Ceilí Band playing hornpipe, two jigs and two reels. The tunes played included 'Over the Hills and Far Away', 'The Leitrim Fancy', 'The Lark in the Morning', 'Apples in the Winter', 'The Traveller' and the 'First house in Connaught'. On the occasion the band comprised of Thomas Canning, J.P. Blessing, P. Fitzpatrick, J. McKiernan and J. Rawl, and Mr. Gerald Dunleavy, Mohill sang 'The Song that reached my Heart'. The Aherne girls, two pupils at Mohill Vocational School sang an Irish song 'Moll Dubh an Gleanna'. Also Mohill Guard McCarthy, Mohill, gave an excellent rendition of 'The valley lay smiling before me'.

In part II of the programme the Cloone School Choir under teacher Mrs. McDermott sang three Irish songs and Miss Dunleavy Mohill sang Shuil aGradh, The Castle of Dunmore and Hi Ho the Morning Dew. Next Gerald Dunleavy delighted his listeners with the rending of the ballad 'Billy O' Rourke'. The last item on the agenda for the evening by Miss Phyllis Clancy, Ck-on- Shannon, was a beautiful and suitable song "Ireland I love you". The programme was a great success and at the time put the village of Cloone to be known in all corners of Ireland as there was only one air wave station for reception.

A further honour was bestowed on Cloone Ceilí Band in May 1938 when they were invited to perform at the Spring Show in Dublins RDS. Some students of Mohill Vocational School also travelled with them, and gave a spinning demonstration.

On the 4th January 1939 Cloone Ceilí Band made their final broadcast. Again this was a first class programme. A remarkable feature of the broadcast was that it was received loud and clear in England and Scotland and Fr. Peter received many letters of congratulations as a result.

On the programme a Mr. Murt Curran, Dancing Master from Carlow, performed Irish dancing to the backing of the Cloone Ceilí band. He documented how he became involved with Cloone and the Ceilí band up to his performance on Radio Eireann as follows:

"Some time previously I had quite unexpectedly got a letter from a P.P. in Cloone, Co. Leitrim. His name was Fr. Peter Conefrey, a man who was very keen on all Irish culture, music song and dance. He had all kinds of dance teachers from the west of Ireland and even from Dublin City teaching

dancing for him and his parishioners. But strange to say he was never fully satisfied with their tuition on the grounds that their steps were not really traditional. Evidently the Gaelic League in Dublin heard of my return from England and they notified him about me and said I might meet with his approval. They sent him my address in Carlow, and he wrote me a very nice letter, inviting me to come to his parish in County Leitrim.

I did look forward to my trip to the west of Ireland and meeting this Parish Priest who was interested in Irish step dancing. When the morning came for me to depart to the West, I remember cycling to the local bus stop and putting my bike on the bus and settling down for my journey. I changed at Dublin and took the Sligo bus. It was Saturday night when I arrived at Dromod and it was from there his workman drove me all the way up to Cloone. Of course all arrangements had been made where I would be staying etc. Also I was to be paid a special fee weekly by the Parish Priest. After some refreshments in my new digs myself and my new friend who took me on the last stage of my journey arrived at the Parochial House. The P.P. himself opened the door to us. My friend Michael Cooney by name, introduced me saying I was the dance teacher from Carlow. The priest laughed, he was just a medium sized man and I was over six feet tall. He looked at me and said you must be humbugging me, he cannot dance, come in anyway he said and sit down. He was busy writing in the Bishops Book. A lovely big turf fire was burning in the sitting room grate and I sank into one of the sitting room chairs and enjoyed the comfort as it was a very cold night outside. My friend Mr. Cooney left and after a few minutes the P.P. sat opposite me and we discussed Irish dancing. He was very interesting and I learned quite a lot of names of steps he mentioned such as the 'Salmon Leap'

and the 'Corkscrew Step' and many others which I have forgotten. Now, as I looked around the sitting room I saw some musical instruments. I asked him if he played music? "No" he said, but we have a Cheilidh Band here in Cloone which had already broadcast from Radio Eireann, which I did not know about. He told me the Ceili Band practiced weekly in the kitchen which was very large one. After some time I went back to my digs, only a short way down the street. He was a dance hall owner named Doherty. It was mostly all ballroom dancing that was done there. Next day was Sunday and I went to mass which was at 11 o'clock. The P.P. was the celebrant. He gave no sermon, but said he had important news for them. He mentioned how I had come to Leitrim on the highest references from the Gaelic League in Dublin to teach Irish dancing. He said he wanted all National teachers, vocational and anyone with any knowledge of Irish dancing to come on Sunday afternoon when I would give an exhibition of Irish dancing, and they would see if I was a good dancer or not. I can assure you all eyes were on me, as I was sitting in the front seat, and I felt most uncomfortable. After my lunch I went to perform. All the people from the parish and other districts assembled, and many other dancers were there including all the well known musicians from far and near. His reverence P.P. was not long in arriving. We started off with the concert first and the Ceili band. Then my turn came I felt more nervous than I ever was in the big concert halls in Lancashire. Anyway I got a great reception, and Fr. Conefrey made the announcement that I was surely a professional and the best yet that he had ever seen and I had a most enjoyable afternoon. Afterwards classes were arranged for me in all the schools of the parish as well. One night at the Ceili band practice in the P.P. house that I happened to be at, I suggested to him after listening to the Ceili band music that it would blend nicely if they

were to have a step dancer with the music. He said it was a wonderful idea. He would be going to Dublin in a couple of days time and would see the director of the programme, the director said it would be very interesting to see how the step dancing would come over on the radio. As the date of the broadcast was near we had to put special effort into our work. I can recall the priest with his watch in hand timing our performance and listening to my stepping with the music. He thought I blended very nicely. His reverence always had a basket of bottled Guinness for to keep us in good form.

The day of the broadcast came at last and I remember going back to Carlow for a couple of days beforehand. The arrangement was made that I would meet the boys at the Belvedere Hotel in Dublin. It had been snowing very heavily in the west. They had arranged to come in motor cars but only got to Longford and on account of the drifts of snow on the roads they had to take the train. When I arrived at the hotel there was no one there. This was 2p.m. but the lady at the reception desk said there was a phone message for me from Fr. Conefrey. He told her that when I arrived to let me know the train would arrive around 5p.m. We had a rehearsal in the Hotel. The broadcast was to be at 8p.m. We went down to the Radio Studios and were brought along the studio and put in position. I was near the mike and a little tap-dancing board on the ground. Fr. Conefrey compered the show himself. I danced four dances at intervals. All radios were tuned around Carlow because all the papers and also the western weeklies had advance notice on the matter. It was a great honour for me being the first to step dance on the radio and give selections on the radio. We were booked for a tour of America, but alas,

the Rev. Fr. Conefrey died and Ireland lost a lovely priest and an Irishman. Of course the tour was cancelled and indeed the Ceili Band was also.

On Sunday April 24th 1939 when about to prepare for 11 o'clock mass, Fr. Peter suddenly felt ill and collapsed on his sitting room floor. In anguish his house-keeper rushed to the room only to find that the life of this noble hearted man was ended. The people of the parish and far beyond were numbed with shock to hear of Fr. Conefrey's sudden death at the untimely age of 59 years. The sad news spread far afield and when the contents of the deceased's will were made known, the great priest's wishes were honoured in being buried in a black pauper's coffin and laid to rest with his ancestors in the family burial ground plot at Farnaught graveyard Gortletteragh.

As an eternal tribute to this great priest and patriot a memorial is situated outside the cemetery in Cloone with the following inscription:

"This patriot priest throughout his life laboured unceasingly to reconstruct the Irish Nation by promoting all aspects of Irish Culture. He equally worked for the economic betterment of rural Ireland by fostering the cottage industrial system in preference to the factory system".

A plaque on St Mary's Church Cloone also reads:

"By his charity, piety and zeal, he lives in the affections of his people".