

“Another famous fiddler of the same generation” Thomas ‘Blind’ Kiernan (c. 1807–1887)

Aidan O’Hara

When I was in Detroit in 1967, I sang with my folk group The Celts at the famous Living End folk club which, along with Wisdom Tooth, Poison Apple and the Chessmate, was showcasing folk and blues talent in Detroit at the time. The popular Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell had appeared there a few weeks before us. On our last evening, I was surprised and delighted to receive a present, a book, from a woman who liked our singing and had come to hear us a few times during the week we were there. She was Beverley Borowicz, the daughter of the owner of Detroit’s biggest second-hand bookstore. I remember her name because, although her people came from eastern Europe, she speculated that her surname indicated she might well be a descendant of Brian Bóramha.

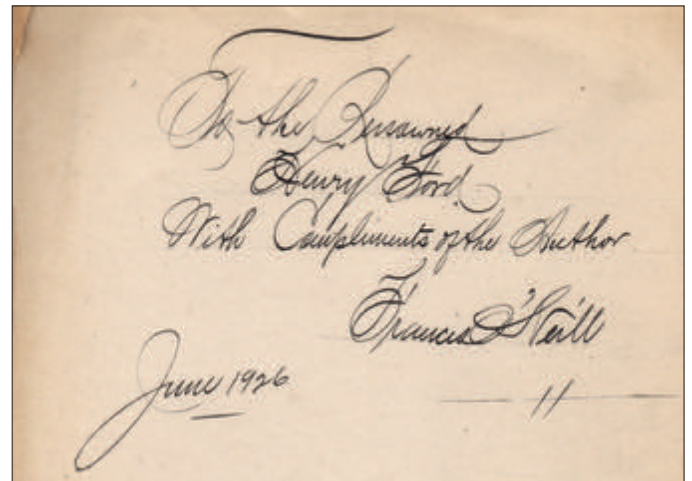
I listened politely, leaving the thought with her. Much later, I learned through my Drumlish family that I had personal associations with that remarkable book of Capt. Francis O’Neill’s, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*.¹

On page 369, in that section of his book where he deals with “Sketches of Some Famous Fiddlers”, O’Neill has a brief account of “Blind” Kernan, my great-granduncle from Cartron-Oghill, Drumlish, Co. Longford. He was born in 1807 and died 1887. It is worth noting that he spelled his name M’Kernan, as did his brother, Fr. Michael M’Kernan, their version of Mac Thighearnáin, which today is commonly rendered as McKernan, McKiernan and Kiernan. It was the practice then and, indeed, until relatively recent times, for people to restore the Mc or the O to their family names to indicate status or position. Otherwise they were known locally as the Kiernans (or Kernans), etc. But when Michael entered the priesthood, the Mc was restored, and similarly with Tom, who became known as Master McKernan, having gained renown in Longford and Leitrim as a fiddlemaster.

In the Convent of Mercy, Ballymahon, Schools’ Collection, 4 March, 1935, Sr. M. Clement records in Irish the following which I have translated: “An old fiddler by the name of Séamus Ó hAinlighe (James Hanley), Cor Ubhail (Corrool), Cur na Dumhcha (Newtowncashel), died 30 years ago in the Poor House, Ballymahon. He was an accomplished musician. He had been a scholar of Máighistir

Mac Tighearnan’s (Master McKiernan). He also played the flute and taught fiddle-playing to the youth of the area.” James Hanley was the great-grandfather of the famous fiddle player, Seán Keane of The Chieftains.

The other family connection was with the man whose book it had been, none other than Henry Ford II, son of Edsel Ford and grandson of Henry Ford I, the founder of the Ford Motor Company.



Capt. Francis O’Neill inscribed the book in his beautiful penmanship, “To the Renowned Henry Ford, With Compliments of the Author Francis O’Neill. June 1926.”

Anne McDonnell, daughter of James McDonnell and granddaughter of Peter McDonnell of Melkagh townland, Drumlish, got married to Henry Ford II in 1940; they were divorced in 1964. Peter McDonnell’s

¹ Francis O’Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago, 1913).

sister was Rosetta Burbage (wife of Edward Burbage) of Greagh, Drumlish. They were two of the children born to James McDonnell and Mary Connell of Melkagh townland. Eleanor Rodgers and Thomas Gray were the witnesses to Edward Burbage and Rosetta McDonnell's marriage at Drumlish on 28 January, 1870.² My late father, Jim O'Hara, told me that a Rogers cousin of his was married to a member of the McDonnell family but he was unable to recall the names of the individuals concerned.³

CONMHAICNE and MUSIC

Kiernan was my great-grandmother's brother and, while he may have gone blind eventually, he was sighted for part of his life because he wrote and read music and signed his name in a clear, fluent style – sometimes as *M'Kernan* and at other times as *Kernan*.⁴ He taught music and fiddle-playing in an area known in ancient Longford, south Leitrim and south Cavan as Conmhaicne Maigh Réin – Conmhaicne for short.⁵

Sligo and Clare are celebrated for the richness of their traditional music heritage, and it is well-deserved, but we here in Longford are no less rich in our musical heritage. It can be argued that at one time we were far ahead when it came to the spread and the teaching of music in written form. Thanks to the work in recent years of two men in particular, we have learned this remarkable fact about what was passed on to us from times before the great Famine of the 1840s and later:

there are eleven collections of written music – manuscripts – in Conmhaicne, and if we had even just one or two collections, that would be remarkable enough in itself; but eleven altogether with many hundreds of tunes in some of them is phenomenal and probably unique in Ireland.

Fr John Quinn, P.P. Gortletteragh, Co. Leitrim has done a lot of work collecting the written music of the



Fr. John Quinn with 1840s Kernan-Leonard manuscript.

area and has made recordings of the music from local players. He is an accomplished fiddle player and music teacher, and his lifetime's work as a collector has resulted in what is probably one of the finest private collections in Ireland. Conor Ward from Annaduff in Co. Leitrim, who learned the fiddle from Enda McNamara of Aughavas, Co Leitrim, himself a former pupil of John Quinn's, is a leading authority on Kiernan and the music of Conmhaicne.

One of the earliest music manuscripts to come into John Quinn's possession was that of 'Blind' Kiernan's which Conor studied in depth and was the basis of his Master's degree. The 1840s manuscript was secreted in a most unlikely place, and its finding makes for a fascinating tale. In the year 1962 when carpenter Pierce Butler was working on the roof of Rooney's pub in his native village of Abbeyshrule, he found it hidden in the roof.

² Information received in correspondence with historian David Leahy, 13 November, 2017.

³ The spelling of surnames within families varied widely in the nineteenth century, and this was true of the Rogers/Rodgers family of Longford, most of whom eventually settled for the Rogers form. The name stands for McRory, especially in Ulster, and family tradition has it that our Rogers family were McRorys from Co. Tyrone. Other such Longford 'arrangements' for Irish names include Gray for Colreavy (*Mac Cathal Riabhaigh*) and Victory for McNaboe (*Mac Anabadha*, a pseudo-translation of the Irish, as if it were *Mac na buadha*).

⁴ Thomas's brother the priest always signed his name *M'Kernan*.

⁵ James Joseph McNamee, *History of the Diocese of Ardagh* (Browne & Nolan, Dublin, 1954), p. 6. The ecclesiastical diocese of Ardagh, which is made up mainly of parishes in Longford, south Leitrim and south Cavan, is practically coterminous with the resulting final boundaries of Conmhaicne. Bishop McNamee stated that "in the Middle Ages, Ardagh was known as the diocese of the Conmhaicne".



A page from the rare Kernan–Leonard manuscript 1844–46, used by Thomas 'Blind' Kernan in teaching his pupil Michael Leonard (c.1835–1886). In his handwriting, Kernan has given the names of the tunes, and beside one of them he has given the date and signed his name: Sporting Kate - - January 4th 1845. T. Kernan. (Used with the permission of Fr. John Quinn, P.P. Gortletteragh, Co. Leitrim.)



Conor Ward speaking on the Kernan–Leonard ms, at the launch of Cumann Ceoil Chonmhaicne, 8 August, 2016.

On opening the manuscript, Butler found the names Michael Leonard and Thomas M'Kernan on several pages, and here and there were dates ranging from October 1844 to January 1846. Fortunately, Pierce was a fiddle player, so the owner of the pub, Mrs. Rooney, was happy to let him keep the manuscript.

One evening in February 1973, Pierce was listening to a music programme on RTÉ Radio when he heard the name Thomas Kernan mentioned by one of the guests. The man he heard speaking was Fr. Quinn, C.C. in Lanesborough at the time, who mentioned that the céilí band he was teaching played music from a manuscript that was transcribed by Lawrence 'Larry' Smyth (1866–1930), who lived in Kilbride, Abbeylara, Co. Longford. He added that Larry had been taught the fiddle by Bernard Rogers (1856–1907) of Oghill, Killoe parish,

who in turn had been taught by his uncle, Thomas 'Blind' Kiernan.⁶

Coincidentally, the week following the 1973 RTÉ Radio broadcast, John Quinn happened to visit Pierce Butler, who mentioned to him that he had heard him on the radio and that he had something important to show him. It was the Kiernan manuscript, and he made a gift of it to Fr. Quinn. Research has since revealed that the manuscript was written while Kiernan was teaching the fiddle to Michael Leonard (c.1835-1886). At that time in the 1840s, the Leonard family owned the pub and it may be surmised that Michael secreted the manuscript in the roof space for safekeeping some time before his death in 1886.

"An analysis of the manuscript offers a unique insight into the type of music Kiernan was playing and teaching at this time," says Conor Ward. "Specifically, the repertoire is dominated by the music of waltzes and quadrilles, the respective dances of which were all the rage across Ireland and Europe in the 1800s. An examination of Kiernan's music in this manuscript also reveals that he taught a specific bowing technique termed locally as 'slur and cut'. So popular was this technique, it became the cornerstone of fiddle style in County Longford and south Leitrim for the next 100 years or so. Examples of its use have been found in several more fiddle manuscripts all over this region transcribed by students of Kiernan's between c1860 and c1900."⁷

Among those doing the transcribing was my granduncle, the aforementioned Bernard Rogers. His sister Anne, my grandmother, was married to John O'Hara of Loughan, Drumlish. Her son was Jim O'Hara, my father, who told me that Bernard's fiddle hung on the kitchen wall at home and that his mother would not let anyone touch it. "It was the death of him," she would say, referring to the fact that Bernard had "a strong weakness for the drink", a fondness acquired from the many occasions in homes, taverns and the 'big house' where his services as a musician, and those of his uncle's, were required. It was an occupational hazard for all musicians.

One of the venues where Bernard and his uncle played was the Red Cow tavern, which was located 500 yards from where I now live, and just over a mile away from Castle Forbes, the home of Lord Granard, who had them play for him at balls and family events.⁸ In "Sketches of Famous Fiddlers" in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, Francis O'Neill writes about performers in the middle of the 19th century, one whom was Kiernan:

Another famous fiddler of the same generation known as 'Blind' Kernan taught a noted fiddle player named Kennedy of Drumlish, County Longford, and Terence Smith, now Chicago. Many a pleasant hour Mr. Gillan spent listening to Kernan's music in 1850, when he played at the 'Red Cow' tavern, a mile distant from the town of Longford.⁹

The "noted fiddle player named Kennedy" to whom O'Neill refers is Peter Kennedy (c.1822-1902) who was actually from Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim, and a renowned fiddlemaster. The Mr. Gillan mentioned by O'Neill is John Gillan, originally from Gillan's Lane, Ardnacassa, Longford, a piper and collector of traditional Irish music and afterwards a successful businessman in Chicago. Conor Ward states that he was "One of our best sources for information on pipers in Longford in the 19th Century."¹⁰ He gave his name to the tune *Gillan's Apples*.

Conor has been a member of Fr. Quinn's ceilí bands since the early 1990s and when Fr Quinn's Under-18 Band 'Ceolus' won the All-Ireland céilí band competition in the year 2000, the band's repertoire was sourced directly from regional manuscripts. The playing of that music reflects John Quinn's aim of ensuring that the music of Conmhaicne is heard once again in the region, and further afield, in fact. Indeed, over the last few decades, several students of John Quinn's have further disseminated this music through commercial recordings, publications, concerts and tutoring. Among the musicians who were foremost in the early recording scene in America, and who were

⁶ Conor Ward, "Hidden in the Roof: Uncovering Irish traditional fiddle music in County Longford" in the *Longford Leader*, 23 April, 2015.

⁷ Conor Ward, unpublished Ph.D. Research Thesis, Dundalk Institute of Technology.

⁸ The Red Cow tavern was located on the site of McGrath's Centra, Texaco Service Station, at the junction of the R198 (road to Drumlish) and the N4 Dublin/Sligo road, where the roundabout at that location is called The Red Cow Roundabout.

⁹ O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, p. 369; in O'Neill's book the name Drumlish is mistakenly written Drumlisk.

¹⁰ Conor Ward, unpublished Ph.D. Research Thesis, Dundalk Institute of Technology.

influenced by Kiernan's music, were fiddle players Frank Quinn and James Clarke from Drumlish, Packie Dolan from Aughadowry, Ballinamuck, and Paddy Reynolds from Garvary, Dromard parish.

Fr. Quinn encouraged Conor to make a formal study of the development of fiddle music of north Longford from the period c.1800 to c.1975. In 2011, Conor began a Master's Degree in the Dundalk Institute of Technology, and that study soon became the subject of a Ph.D. which he completed in 2017. From his detailed and rigorous research work, Conor has unearthed an impressive amount of information about the Kiernan and Rogers families. While we are seriously short of personal detail on 'Blind' Kiernan, we learn from Conor's researches that Thomas was about eighty years old when he died in the workhouse in Longford on 26 October, 1887. In his death certificate, he was referred to as 'musician'. He had never married, and being blind and probably destitute, the good Sisters of Mercy cared for him there from 1870 onwards.¹¹

When taking down details for our family tree in 1975, my late father told me that his grandmother's family, the Kiernans, had moved to Cartron, Drumlish, from Cranley, Edgeworthstown. Conor Ward found that among the "numerous sources" confirming the Cranley connection was an article by Donal Glennon. He wrote that his granduncle John Carty "learned the fiddle from an old blind travelling fiddler called 'Blind' Kiernan who was from the same place as William (Donal's father): Crabley (*recte* Cranley), Co. Longford".¹²

CUMANN CEOIL CHONMHAICNE

Arising out of all he has learned about Thomas 'Blind' Kiernan, Conor Ward came to the conclusion that there was a need for a society to continue and explore Kiernan's contribution to the world of Irish traditional music and in particular to the fiddle music of Conmhaicne. Cumann Ceoil Chonmhaicne was launched in August 2016, and among its aims are plans to make the historical manuscripts, field recordings and commercial recordings of Longford

musicians available to the public, and to preserve the original manuscripts and recordings, including those from Fr. John Quinn's collection. One of John's tape recordings features the fiddle playing of Michael Francis McNerney (1898-1975) of Fostra, parish of Dromard, in 1973. That recording has been of considerable importance to Conor in his researches, as McNerney's fiddle lineage can be traced directly back, through Jamesy Doyle, Glenmore and Bernard Rogers to 'Blind' Kiernan. Coincidentally, both Conor and John have written about Kiernan for *Teabhtha*, the journal of County Longford Historical Society, whose editor is James MacNerney, son of the same Michael Francis McNerney recorded by Fr. Quinn.¹³

Among the many contributions John Quinn has made to Irish music as a collector and musicologist is what might be called his 'musical family tree' in which he has traced the musical descent of fiddlers from Kiernan down to the present day. He notes, for instance, that fiddle player Dervla McManus was a pupil of Enda McNamara's, who was pupil of his, and that he, John, in turn was a pupil of Mickey Reilly's, who was Terry Reilly's pupil, and that Terry was a pupil of Peter Kennedy's from the mid-1800s.¹⁴ From his study and analysis of the Kernan/Leonard manuscript and others in John Quinn's possession, and his acquisition of copies of the Mary Brady Hughes family collection, Conor Ward has succeeded in mapping the evolution of fiddle music in Conmhaicne.

Kennedy and Kiernan both taught music through note reading and, through careful handing-down of the music over almost a hundred years, almost a dozen manuscript collections have been made by individuals and preserved by their families. The period in question roughly spans the years 1844 to 1930. And so, successive generations of students can trace their fiddle heritage back to those two fiddle masters. "Given the plethora of regional manuscripts," Conor Ward states, "my Ph.D. dissertation has focused on the written sources relating solely to north Longford and the fiddle tradition of Thomas 'Blind' Kiernan. Through this particular fiddle lineage of 'Blind'

¹¹ Irish Deaths 1864-1958, Registration District: Longford, Vol. 3, page 156, The General Register Office, Werburgh Street, Dublin 2. cf. www.findmypast.ie. (From Conor Ward's researches for his Ph. D. dissertation.)

¹² Donal Glennon, "The Life and Times of Liam Glennon", *Treoir*, Vol. 25 No. 4, (1993), page 41.

¹³ Conor Ward unpublished Ph.D. Research Thesis.

¹⁴ End note iv in Fr. Quinn's Golden and Silver Jubilee Concert Programme, Sunday, 17 July, 2016, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim.

Kiernan these manuscripts have provided the opportunity to examine how fiddle music evolved in the region over the course of two centuries in facets such as repertoire and fiddle style."

DRUMLISH, A MAJOR SOURCE OF MANUSCRIPTS

We have often marvelled at the serendipity of how 'Blind' Kiernan's 1840s teaching manuscript was found hidden in a roof space in 1962, and then how fortunate it was that the finder, a fiddle player himself, passed it one to another fiddle player who was also a student of the tunes and dance music of Longford. This find was a huge boost to John Quinn who was well on his way to amassing his unique collection of music manuscripts from the region of Conmhaicne.

In early 2015, Conor Ward was well into his Ph.D. researches and preparing to write up his dissertation when amazingly another manuscript collection materialised, about which he says that "for sheer size and completeness is extraordinary". Once again, the finding of the collection came about purely by chance. Retired teacher and fiddle player Mrs Mary Brady Hughes was at a musical evening in our house in Longford town, and I showed her a copy of a *Master Rogers Reel Medley*. I told her who he was, mentioned his uncle, 'Blind' Kiernan, whose 1840s manuscript was in the possession of fiddle player Fr John Quinn. I also mentioned Conor Ward's study of the evolution of fiddle music in Conmhaicne c.1825-c.1975, focusing on a lineage of musicians connected through the teaching of Kiernan.

Mary then said she had a collection of music manuscripts at home somewhere which she could show me. A day or so later she brought along the first of two batches of manuscript material, compiled by musicians from the parish of Drumlish, and a few days later she produced the second batch, the two together totalling six manuscripts, containing approximately 500 tunes. The material was written and compiled between c.1865 and c.1930 by three generations of fiddle players from Gaique and Aughadowry, all of them descended, musically speaking, from Kiernan. "This find is truly amazing," said Conor, "and is only matched by the kindness of Mary Brady Hughes who has generously shared them with others and allowed me to copy them. They constitute a major element in my researches, and all of us are in debt to her and her family for preserving

the manuscripts which will in time be made accessible to musicians and students of the music."

The earliest manuscript was written by Mary's great-grand uncle Patrick O'Farrell (c.1835-fl.1865) of Aughadowry, Ballinamuck. O'Farrell was a fiddle pupil of 'Blind' Kiernan's, probably sometime in the 1850s or 1860s, and he wrote this manuscript about 1865. In addition to the popular tune types, such as reels, jigs, and hornpipes, the music of recently invented dances from across Europe in the form of polkas, galops and mazurkas is found throughout the manuscript.

These types of tunes are not present in the earlier 1840s Leonard-Kernan MS found in Abbeysrule and therefore the music in this O'Farrell manuscript demonstrates how Kiernan's repertoire – and Irish music in general – was rapidly evolving at that time in the mid-19th century, absorbing the music of various cultures from all across the world. O'Farrell passed his manuscript on to his nephew, Francis Reynolds (1862–1946), a school teacher from Gaique, Ballinamuck. Reynolds, who it appears was also taught by 'Blind' Kiernan, added a further three manuscripts to the collection. His transcriptions contain many of Kiernan's trademark teaching techniques such as 'preludes' and the bowing technique 'slur and cut'.

When Reynolds left for America in the early 1900s he passed the collection over to his niece and fiddle player Maggie Reynolds (1908–1995) who later married a local fiddler Packie Brady of Gaique. Maggie was taught the fiddle by another of 'Blind' Kiernan's students, a local musician and seanachai 'Red' Phil Brady (1864–1946) of Upper Gaique, Ballinamuck. Maggie added another manuscript of her own and in turn passed the collection on to her daughter Mary Brady Hughes of Cullyfad, Killoe who is also a fiddle player and teacher. Mary's collection is now referred to as The O'Farrell-Reynolds MSS.

FIDDLEMASTER BLIND KIERNAN ROUNDABOUT

The N5 road is a national primary road in Ireland, connecting Longford town with Westport. In 2012, a new single carriageway link between routes N4 and N5 provided a bypass to the northwest of Longford town. As part of the scheme, and funded by the 'Percent for art' money, Longford County Council's Public Art Committee commissioned a sculpture for the new N5 bypass. Cork artist Alex Pentek came up

with a sculpture of a violin, designed to look as though it is embedded in the ground. It was Alex's and the Council's way of recognising "the rich musical heritage of the county".



'Sunken fiddle' sculpture on bypass linking routes N4 and N5 at Longford.

As motorists speed past the giant fiddle half-buried to the side of the carriageway, they scratch their heads wondering what it all means. To help them, the committee members of Cumann Ceoil Chonmhaicne thought they would see if it might be possible to connect the fiddle with Longford's most famous fiddle master who contributed so much to "the rich musical heritage of the county". The location of the Red Cow tavern where Kiernan played is just about a mile away.

With the help and guidance of Councillor Seamus Butler, the committee wrote to the Longford

Municipal District Council with their request. They in turn contacted the national roads authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, who gave permission to rename the Aghareagh Roundabout at the N5 junction of the bypass: Fiddlemaster 'Blind' Kiernan Roundabout – *Timpeallán 'Caoch' Mhic Thiarnáin*.

Cumann Ceoil Chonmhaicne plans to celebrate 'Blind' Kiernan and his music, and their efforts at having his name and calling on view to the public at a humble roundabout is a start. The people of Longford are proud in celebrating who they are through music, song and dance, and it is fitting that we note the great fiddlemaster's contribution in this unique way. Thomas Kiernan died one hundred and thirty years ago this year, and, while we do not know where exactly he is buried, he has been commemorated in recent times by his relatives in a new gravestone at the O'Hara/Kiernan plot in Drumlish's old cemetery.

Aidan O'Hara has strong Longford connections – his father was born in Drumlish, and Aidan moved here in 2004 from Dublin. He is an eminent author, broadcaster and historian who is a regular contributor to *Teathbha* and to other publications.



The committee of Cumann Ceoil Chonmhaicne succeeded in their efforts to rename the roundabout near the 'sunken' fiddle on the N5 bypass at Longford: Fiddlemaster 'Blind' Kiernan Roundabout – *Timpeallán 'Caoch' Mhic Thiarnáin*. Pictured are Aidan O'Hara's sister, Kathleen, and his wife Joyce. 'Blind' Kiernan was Aidan and Kathleen's great-granduncle. (Photo: Aidan O'Hara)