

The Mysterious Notebook of

By **GEORGE E. RYAN**

Veteran staff writer of The Pilot and a respected author, George E. Ryan has been called "perhaps the embodiment of what a journalist should be" by The Boston Globe.

We'll get to the bottom of it yet, but, at the moment, all we have is a tantalizingly mysterious little booklet, mostly Irish, nearly 80 pages in length, and started--so it would appear--171 years ago in Johnstown, Cork, by one Patrick O'Keeffe.

The booklet is part diary, part daybook, part chapbook, the whole currently on display in the headquarters of the Scituate Historical Society. But nobody seems to know just how the book got there or what relationship it or the author has to that Plymouth County colonial town.

The book is a true manuscript, entirely penned by hand. A sort of title-page identifies it as "Patrick O'Keeffe his book" and provides the date "June the 21st 1816." It was "wrote by Micheal Keeffe (in the) County of Cork," and the earliest pages are scribbled throughout with place-names like Johnstown and Fermoy, with personal names like Capt. (Patrick?) Leahy, Elizabeth, John O'Connell, Catherine O'Neill, Daniel Lane, John

Everton, and John Connell.

The bulk of the pages is given over to transcriptions of several poems which apparently caught Patrick's fancy. Most of the works are written in an outdated Irish (so one young lady, perfectly fluent in modern Irish, has assured me) that includes old-fashioned script, words, abbreviations, and spellings.

Some poems are transcribed by Patrick in translation. Page 11, e.g., begins thus: "John Connells Poem Translated by Some Unknown Composer from the Irish to the English Tongue and Written by Patrick O'Keeffe For His Own Use October the 13th Anno Domini 1816." ("Irish heroes when I remind the faith and Church now thrown aside...")

The Connell selection is filled with Scriptural and classical references: the tower of Babel, Moses, Nimrod, "Noah's children Sem, Ham, Japhet," as well as Atlas, Argus, Polyphemus, Hercules, Jason, Cyclops, Cerberus, Scylla and Charybdis.

The poem also retails the story of how the Egyptian "Pharo" gave his daughter Scotia in marriage to Niall, thus "Our Irish men derived a name/ And the land from her by name..."

Common to most of Patrick O'Keeffe's transcriptions are his own inserts in Irish, suggesting that certain English words in the

poem, legend, or prayer being copied were more meaningful to him in Irish than in English.

Thus, when naming the three early Queens and sisters from whom "Ireland should derive a name" (Eire, Fodhla, Banba), O'Keeffe enumerates them in Irish script, intruding the Gaelic rendering into verses otherwise written in English.

About halfway through the book, having transcribed numerous works about Irish history and saints (Patrick in particular), O'Keeffe shifts abruptly to a series of scientific and mathematical "Problems."

Again using a mix of Irish and English words, Patrick labors over a kind of perpetual calendar, painstakingly plotting "on what day of the month doth the new moon fall upon or commence." He also provides formulas and charts to determine leap years and the dates of Easter well into the 21st Century.

Patrick also tackles the age-old challenges of determining whether or not a woman is pregnant and predicting the gender of her child long before its birth.

The last half-dozen of O'Keeffe's pages are a hodgepodge of doodles, trial runs at the calligraphy he (or his collaborator, Micheal) would

Reflections on a variety of things Irish.

Patrick O'Keeffe *£ ccs*

later craft so skillfully, and an assortment of ledgers and charts suggesting work done and money owed him by employers.

And there are interpolations like one he apparently jotted down after a visit to his priest: "June the 9th 1819 Pennance a Rosary every night for the course of 2 weeks and 2 R. in the chapel."

But most of O'Keeffe's notations concern services rendered and money due (in pounds, shillings, and pence). Patrick seems to have been a cobbler by trade, several 1819 entries referring to shoes made, nailed, trimmed, or mended, with the names, presumably customers, of Terry Madden, J. Curtin, Roach, Lane, Terry Sullivan, Mrs. Ryan, Pat Slattery, Thomas, and "myself"

scattered among the record of hours worked and ~~he~~ charged.

In this latter portion, confusion reigns supreme, at least for one (like the oversigned) who lacks Irish completely.

At one point, in Irish and English, Patrick dates his page (No. 55) "Boston, February 20th, 1847," this followed by the dates June 27 and June 30, 1847. Does this mean he had by then emigrated and taken up residence here? (Boston directories do list a Patrick O'Keeffe, shoemaker, from 1843 to 1853 as living at various addresses in the North End.)

By Page 75, Patrick's record of jobs done includes citation of certain "removes," "a horse for a load of Turf," supplies of steel and "pots of sugar," "1 lincks

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pin and 1 washer," and the familiar "shoes made." Had Patrick become a general tradesman, livery stable proprietor, farrier, building supplier?

And the page's dates--late 1817 and early 1818--why do they follow the 1847 date and "Boston" on Page 55?

One other mystery of Patrick O'Keeffe's chaphook is in the form of a clipping from *The Boston Sunday Globe* dated December 1878 or 1879.

Tucked into Patrick's book, the yellowing newsprint is a letter to the editor signed *Aodh Beag* which concerns the then-flourishing Philo-Celtic Society of Boston, founded in 1873. The letter is a promotion for the study of Irish here "in our own midst, on the soil of liberty."

Aodh Beag sings the praises of the Irish tongue, a "neglected language" whose history is so ancient as to be "lost in the night of time." He recalls many of the legends copied out by Patrick--

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the Pharaoh's daughter Scotia, her son by Niall called Caodhal Glas, e.g.--and ends with an invitation to "all interested in the revival of the Irish language" to attend Society classes Tuesday evenings and Sunday afternoons at the school, 758 Washington Street. Did Patrick O'Keeffe himself insert the cutting into his book? Was he a member of the Philo-Celtic Society? Did he plan to join? Was he *Aodh Beag*? And how, if at all, does Patrick relate to Scituate? There is no record of his having lived in the town or worked there. And yet, the 1847 date and "Boston" suggests he may have been acquainted with some among the scores of Boston Irish families who went south to Scituate after 1845 to harvest the off-shore carriage or Irish Moss.

The questions pop up by the dozens. If at all possible, we will "stay on the story" and report to you, gentle reader, as soon as we can. Too good a yarn to pass up.