



- MEET A TOWNIE -



Gleanings of Fr. Frank – clergyman, singer, educator, historian and author

It was when visiting a nursing home run by a religious order of nuns in the parish of St. Joseph in Kilmarnock, Scotland in the late sixties that Fr. Frank McHugh overheard a familiar accent.

Upon making enquiries, he discovered the accent not just to have originated from Donegal but from the area of Rathdonnell just outside Letterkenny.

And when he learned the name of the elderly speaker, Hugh George Gallagher, he realised that he was conversing with a man renowned for writing poems and indeed the author of a number of books of poetry, his first published in 1915.

“I was aware of some of his poems but little did I know I would run into the man himself while visiting this home for the elderly.”

It was a link that he continued over subsequent years, making a point to have a chat with his fellow Donegalman, during his occasional visits. On one such occasion, Hugh George asked Fr Frank if he could ensure that he, the Rathdonnell man, would be buried in his native soil in Temple Douglas graveyard alongside his parents. He had set aside £800 in his will to cover the expenses.

Fr. Frank agreed to follow up on his wishes. “But a few years later, I was visiting the home again only to be told that Hugh George had passed away in October, 1975, and not only that but that he had been buried in Kilmarnock.

“I was particularly angry at this as I had been informed by those in charge of the home that his wishes to be buried in his native parish would be abided by.”

It’s a story that forms part of Fr. Frank’s newly published book ‘Gleanings from Glendowan-Gartan-Glenveagh’ – an account of the history and folklore of those respective areas. And contained within it, an interesting and intriguing aside on the actual burial of Hugh George Gallagher which purchasers and readers of the book can uncover.

Fr. Frank McHugh’s own story, meanwhile, is one deserving of a publication in itself.

Born in Glasgow of Donegal parentage, his father, Anton McHugh, hailed from Coole, Milford, while his mother, Annie Kelly, was a native of New Mills.

Scotland

The family had ended up in Scotland but at



Fr. Frank McHugh

the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the young Frank and his two brothers, Tony and John - the latter still resident in Scotland

and the former, sadly deceased - were temporarily returned to Donegal where they attended Doonen National School in New Mills.

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“Every summer was spent in Donegal – it was a home from home for me,” he relates.

He recalls staying with his grandparents, Francie and Bridget Kelly. “We went fishing and enjoyed that. They had a very small farm and my grandfather was a carpenter and builder and I would help him out.”

Masters degree

He went on to study for the priesthood in England and Scotland before being ordained in 1956. He then spent a period in the parish of St. Margaret’s in Ayr and when that era of his life concluded, took himself off to the University of Oxford to undertake a degree in Economics and Politics following that up with a Masters.

“I worked as a chaplain and a teacher and lectured at a college in Oxford.”

Cambridge University was next on his career schedule where, apart from lecturing, he undertook a Doctorate.

The educational carousel continued with a stint at the University of Sussex for a number of years followed by a further four years at St. Mary’s College in Twickenham which, at the time, was looking for university status. “I helped advance their application and now, I’m pleased to say, it is a University.”

But Donegal was always going to call Fr. Frank back and in 2004 he made that permanent return to reside in the house at Lower Main Street owned by his uncle, Willie John Kelly.

“A lot of changes in the town,” he agrees. “It was a small town back when I knew it first.

“It’s a completely transformed town now. Even motor cars were scarce in my early days.

“I remember the fairs which were always held on the 8th of the month – apart from everything else, they were a great social occasion.”

It was two years ago that he thought of putting down on paper some of the history of the locality where his grandmother, Bridget, had been born and hence the birth of ‘Gleanings from Glendowan-Gartan-Glenveagh’.

“I thought I’d love to write a book about the area. It would be a pity I believed to see the culture and folklore disappearing without recording it and that’s how it came about.”

And how he ended up the centre of

attention in the Veritas Bookshop – not a street length from his own home – on a recent weekday where he signed copies of his newly published creation and drew a positive response from those who arrived to make a purchase.

A familiar figure on the streets of his adopted town, Fr. Frank is also renowned for his outstanding singing voice. And he recalls performing along with the legendary Bridie Gallagher, native of Creeslough, in the old Fiesta Ballroom on Letterkenny’s Port Road.

“And at the interval this man came down to me with tears in his eyes. He told me he was visiting from the United States and when I sang ‘Lough Swilly Shore’, it had made him very emotional because it was a song written by his aunt who had emigrated from Letterkenny and gone to live in Australia.

“Eventually, she came back and set up a boarding house in Rathmullan.”

Three years after that performance in the Fiesta, Fr. Frank had received a phone call from the States from the son of the man, informing him that his father had died and that he wanted to be buried in Conwal cemetery.

“The son had been with his father on the night of the concert in the Fiesta and that’s how he had first got to know me and wanted me to officiate at the burial of his father in Letterkenny. And that I did.”

Fr. Frank was a regular performer in concert halls both here and abroad – and counts the great Irish tenor, John McCormack, as an inspiration and his favourite singer.

Meanwhile, with that ever-present smile on his face, Fr. Frank continues to help out on a regular basis in St. Eunan’s Cathedral and other local churches whenever he’s called upon.

“I had the privilege as a priest working in areas such as education and social affairs that priests don’t have much contact with.

“At the same time, I help local priests with their duties at weekends and since I retired, I’ve had the privilege in Letterkenny of helping the clergy of the Cathedral and the Irish Martyrs.”

A privilege that is no doubt replicated by his fellow clerics and those in the respective congregations where this quietly spoken man is so highly regarded and respected.

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