

## I dabbled in verse and it became my life – Patrick Kavanagh

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Patrick Kavanagh, one of Ireland's greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was born in Inniskeen in 1904 and lived his first 35 years on a small farm there. He was the fourth of nine children born to small farmers and in a house filled with the noise and activity of shoemaking, pig-rearing, and young children. It is in this setting Patrick Kavanagh began to write. Being the oldest son and keeping with Irish tradition he was expected to inherit and run the small family 40-acre farm, but his father realized that his son was a better writer than a farmer. His father said, "he must be a poet because he'd broken every tool on the farm except the crowbar and he bent that." He began to write poetry in his teens and was published in the local papers in his mid-20s. When his first volume *Ploughman and other Poems* was published in 1936, he was still a working farmer. His brother Peter, who was a Dublin-based teacher, urged him to move to the city to establish himself as a writer. He moved to London and wrote

his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Green Fool*. In 1939, as WW2 was breaking out, he settled in Dublin.

Kavanagh had mixed success in the Irish capital. He struggled from a professional point of view, earning a living as a journalist. However, he prospered creatively, producing his epic poem *The Great Hunger* and classic novel *Tarry Flynn*. Both books were initially banned because they showed rural Ireland in a poor light. Kavanagh took another opinion. He said of Tarry Flynn was "the only true account of rural life in Ireland."

While William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney won Nobel prizes and were quoted by US Presidents, acclaim for Kavanagh remains largely confined to his homeland. However, in the past several years there has been an attempt to rectify this as Bono, Hozier, Liam Neeson and other celebrities breathe new life into his legacy. Russell Crowe recited Patrick Kavanagh's poem Sanctity, when he accepted the Best Actor award from the BBC for his role in A Beautiful Mind. Crowe was inspired to read the poem after it was recited by the late Richard Harris who starred alongside Crowe in Gladiator.

It was the poem, *On Raglan Road*, written about unrequited love in 1946 that he is perhaps most remembered for. The poem became a basis for a classic recording by the Dubliners – Raglan Road. Patrick Kavanagh accidentally created the most brilliant love song of all time. The basis for the poem is a beautiful, dark-haired Hilda Moriarity who he met in 1944. Besides aspiring to become a doctor she was a fan of poetry and literature, which is how they met. Kavanagh saw Hilda coming and going from Raglan Road to University on a daily basis and as an excuse to meet her in a shop on St. Stephen's Green, he would often ask her to critique his work. Kavanagh described himself as a peasant poet, but Hilda was not that impressed and teased him - "Can you not, then, write about anything other than stony grey soil and bogs, Paddy?" Kavanagh said, "I will immortalize you in poetry, Hilda." And so, he did. Unfortunately, there was too much of an age gap, she was twenty-two and he was forty, so she ended the relationship.

Working with Kavanagh, Luke Kelly of the well-known Irish band The Dubliners immortalized *Raglan Road*, placing the poem to the music for "The Dawning of the Day."

On Raglan Road on an autumn day I met her first and knew  
That her dark hair would weave a snare that I might one day rue;  
I saw the danger, yet I walked along the enchanted way,  
And I said, let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day.

Besides Luke Kelly's version with The Dubliners, the song has been performed by Van Morrison with The Chieftains, Sinead O'Connor, Billy Joel, and Roger Daltrey, to name a few.

In 1954 two major events had devastating effects that changed Kavanagh's life: firstly, he embarked on an unsuccessful libel action. Then shortly after this ordeal, he was diagnosed with cancer and had a lung removed. While recovering from this operation by relaxing on the banks of the Grand Canal in Dublin, Kavanagh rediscovered his poetic vision and a brilliant phase of poetry followed.

Kavanagh returned frequently to Inniskeen, and the landscape continued to inspire his poetry. As a poet, he often felt isolated, on the margins of society and found comfort in nature and in his treasure-trove of Monaghan memories. He became a literary celebrity and was a much sought after lecturer. In 1967, the Abby Theatre had a major success with their stage version of Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*. While attending the opening performance, Kavanagh was taken ill and taken to a Dublin nursing home, where he died on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1967.

Kavanagh is gone from us forever. All that remains of him lies in a little church, where he was baptized, in Inniskeen; and a statue of him seated on a bench by the Grand Canal in Dublin commemorates him. As he would have said himself, "the account is closed." Perhaps like Molly Malone his ghost will walk again on the crowded streets of Raglan Road.