



by Cathal Liam
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A Letter From Ireland



Hello again! Wish you could have been there. The last weekend in February was certainly a high point for all Irish/Irish-Americans living in town as Friday, the 26th marked the official opening of the Irish Heritage Center of Greater Cincinnati.

After years of searching for just the spot to satisfy her Irish artistic interests, Maureen Kennedy and a handful of others purchased the old McKinley school on Eastern Avenue. In just a few short months, this historic nineteenth-century building located in Columbia Tusculum, Cincinnati's oldest historical neighbourhood, received a preliminary interior renovation and was christened the new home of The Irish American Theater Company.

Its founder and present artistic director, Kennedy, with a life-long career in the arts, has been ably assisted by many enthusiasts including her husband Kent Covey, Xavier University's Tim & Mary White, artist, musician & author Cindy Matyi, stained glass designer Maire Fangman, members of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and men & women of the Ancient Order of Hibernians to mention only a few.

Maureen emphatically states the IHCC will be a volunteer organisation run for the enjoyment of all. Her model and inspiration is the successful, quarter-century-old Chicago Irish American Heritage Center. As there, she envisions the 44,000 square-foot school building becoming the centre for all things Irish including, music, art, dance, history, genealogy, a library and museum, educational cum social events and, of course, theatre. [Over 30,000+ or 10% of Cincinnati residents claim Irish heritage.]

Kennedy states, "The work on renovating the Cen-

ter has only just begun. All manner of volunteer help, supplies and funding are still needed. You're most welcome to come by, visit and lend a hand for the kettle is always on." www.irishcenterofcincinnati.com

Sure it was in this celebratory setting that my wife and I found ourselves the next evening. Seated together with over two hundred theatre-

goers, we settled back for a night of entertainment, thanks to a fine theatre cast and John B. Keane's play, *Moll*.

As I waited for the lights to dim, my mind travelled back to the times I'd enjoyed the convivial hospitality of John B's company and the pleasure of the liquid refreshment that poured forth in his wonderful pub.

I vividly recalled the last time I spoke with him. It was on an evening in early spring. I was staying overnight in Listowel (Co. Kerry) prior to proceeding on to Dingle Town. The place was pleasantly full of locals. A cloud of smoke hung over the patrons' heads as, in rhythmic fashion, brimming full pints of creamy Guinness were served and like clockwork returned empty to his wife Mary and eldest son Billy, both working behind the bar.

There were the soft tones of hushed conversations

about cattle prices and weather. Across the room, a group of convivial women gathered around a table with gin and tonics while their husbands found company with other neighbourhood men seated by the front window. A few played cards while others just enjoyed a drink. It was standing room only at the bar as all the stools were occupied.



Around nine, I noticed Mary looking up, studying the backdoor leading to the family domicile. Without fanfare, as if on cue, Himself emerged through the door. He nodded to some, said a word or two to others and then joined two men sitting at a table along the side wall. Unobtrusively, one of Ireland's greatest playwrights, authors and storytellers had just entered... stage left... a prolific literary giant indeed.

After another pint, I left my seat and walked over to say a few words to him. He smiled and motioned for me to sit down. We made small talk, and I inquired after his health. Unashamedly, he pulled up the front of his shirt, exposing a piece of tubing coming from his stomach. We talked further and I gave him one of my books.

He smiled, wished me good luck and I returned to the bar. That's the way he was, at least with me... kind, thoughtful, encouraging and always with an interesting story or two to tell. John

B died at home a few months later as prostate cancer claimed him at seventy-three.

Now, the next time you are in Ireland, maybe travelling from Shannon to Dingle or points south, carve out some time for a pint and a look around #37 Lower Williams Street in Listowel. Purchased in 1955, the pub is simply called John B. Keane and is a museum to his life's labours. Posters of John's stage productions and films decorate the walls. It's a warm, friendly, authentic Irish pub without all the nonsense popularising such establishments today. The folks sitting around you are some the very people that populated his stories.

Eileen Moriarty, a literary historian, said of John B, "He never ceases to rebel against the web of social injustice, the evils of migration, and the hypocrisy and cruelty of established morality."

Keane authored forty-six works and was a genius at combining melodrama with realism. Much of his inspiration sprang from observing the human parade passing before the window of his pub or gleaned from sharing a pint with a customer. A few of his most noteworthy titles include *The Field*, *The Bodhrán Makers*, *The Matchmaker*, *The Chastitute*, *Big Maggie* plus several collections of short stories. As you leave the pub, head down to the left, toward Main Street. There you'll encounter his life-like, bronze statue crafted by the famous artist Seamus Connolly, installed three years ago.

Finally, during the first week in June, try attending a living tribute to John. Begun in 1971 and inspired by Keane himself, the Listowel Writers' Week features many events devoted to 'the cause of the writer.'

That's it, I must dash, but before I go, *Moll* was great... full of laughter and nostalgia. Sure much of the scandalous honesty that Keane wrote about has largely disappeared today... much to the relief of some and sadness of others.

Keep well and do say a prayer for the men and women of Easter 1916, who gave their all ninety-four years ago this month. God bless them and you too, Cathal

*Cathal is a freelance writer and the author of *Consumed in Freedom's Flame*, *Forever Green*, and *Blood on the Shamrock*. He will have a new book out this fall. www.cathalliam.com.