

BOOKS / By Peter McDermott

The local boycott that embarrassed a nation

Sheila Cloney, a lifelong resident of Fethard-on-Sea, Co. Wexford, always regretted that the first two of her three daughters were baptized in a Catholic church. Her own Church of Ireland recognized those baptisms and would not perform the ceremony again. The Catholic Church, however, would baptize children who'd previously been the subject of the rite in a Protestant church.

Cloney disappeared from the family home with her children on May 8, 1957, and did not return until New Year's Eve, by which time the "domestic dispute" with her husband had been resolved. They became parents of another child in 1961 and lived together in the village until his death in 1999. She died last year.

Back in 1957, she came under pressure from the clergy via her Catholic husband to enroll her elder child in the Catholic school. Her decision to leave ignited a clergy-sponsored boycott of Protestant-owned businesses in the village, on the grounds that the minority community had aided her escape. In fact, only her father Tommy Kelly gave her money and he had tried to dissuade her. Kelly and the village's other Protestant farmers were boycotted. Other victims included the Church of Ireland parish school, which was forced to close because its Catholic teacher resigned, and the local piano teacher, a Protestant, who lost most of her students.

In the "The Fethard-on-Sea Boycott," Tim Fanning writes: "I discovered that the boycott resulted as much from economic motives as from sectarian ones. The local Catholic clergy were anxious to prevent a situation where substantial-sized farms fell into the hands of children who might be reluctant to contribute to parochial revenues."

Only a few Catholic parishioners didn't comply with the boycott - like the republican who had opted to stay excommunicated after the Civil War. The hierarchy, for its part, made it clear in time that it supported the action. It was, however, an enormous embarrassment to Taoiseach Eamon de Valera and he was left with no option but to publicly oppose it. He had been projecting an image of the Republic as a place that was tolerant of minorities. One of his government deputies, the Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin Robert Briscoe, had made a hugely successful tour of American cities in 1956. But from May 1957, the Unionist establishment and media north of the border were making hay of the Fethard boycott, and there were collections in the shipyards of Belfast to aid the beleaguered Protestants in Fethard-on-Sea.

The island's minorities were both very diverse communities. They were different from each other in important respects, however. Northern Ireland's was "stateless," far larger proportionately, less privileged economically and subject to blatant discrimination. The South's had since 1922 affirmed its loyalty to Ireland's independent institutions. But it suffered a crisis of identity because Irishness was defined essentially as Catholic and Gaelic.

Southern Protestants resented most of all Ne Temere, the papal decree enacted in 1908 that required non-Catholics who married Catholics to sign a document agreeing to raise and educate their children in their spouse's religion. Previous-

ly, there had been a tradition in mixed marriages for girls to be raised in the mother's faith and boys in the father's. And there had always been those who had informally raised the children in both religions. This was what Sean and Sheila Cloney had intended to do, despite signing the decree.

By 1957, liberal Protestant intellectuals - notably the essayist Hubert Butler - had had enough and began to question the weak-kneed response of the Church of Ireland bishops and clergy to the boycott.

Meanwhile, the Catholic bishops blamed the media and saw in all of the negative publicity the hand of the Irish Times, Trinity College and other secularizing Protestant institutions. They failed to detect the first signs that Catholics (Fanning cites those in particular associated with the literary periodical *The Bell*) were not towing the party line.

Fast-forward to 1998 and we find Bishop Brendan Comiskey speaking of his "deep sorrow" over the "injustice" done to the Protestants of Fethard-on-Sea. He resigned in 2002 over the issue of the local pedophile priest Fr. Sean Fortune, whom Sean Cloney had tried to expose in the 1980s.

The real hero, though, in Fanning's first-account story is Sheila Cloney. She's central to his thesis that this was not a "blip" (though in making the case he seems to misinterpret a point John McGahern made in his memoirs).

Says Fanning: "In fact, Fethard is a blip, but only because Sheila Cloney, unlike so many of her co-religionists,



Sean and Sheila Cloney with their children Eileen and Mary in their kitchen in January 1958.

stood up to the bullies. The Protestant minority were tolerated because they kept their heads down and, for the most part, accepted that the Catholic Church would have an uncommon amount of influence in matters more properly the

business of the State or individual conscience."

"The Fethard-on-Sea Boycott" is published by Collins Press/Dufour Editions and is priced at \$25.95.

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and pace into the medley, which is full of delicious ornamentation, piquant accents, and improvisatory flashes from all three instrumentalists. It is a fluid, cohesive, wholly absorbing performance, and no less riveting are the slides "Cronin's / O'Keeffe's / Dawley's Delight" and the jigs "John O'Mahony's / Pride of the West / The Pullet That Wants the Cock." In truth, every track is a favorite.

"Those who do not sometimes break the rules never transcend them," said Bernini. He could have been describing the achievement of "Comb Your Hair and Curl It." Utterly brilliant and passionate, this is a no-brainer top five album pick for 2010. The self-issued recording (MOO 333) is available from New Hampshire's Ossian USA at www.ossianusa.com or 603-783-4383.

Upcoming concerts

Fiddler Brendan Mulvihill, a founding member of the Irish Tradition (a trio featuring Billy McComiskey and Andy O'Brien), will be performing solo at 9 p.m. on Fri., Sept. 24, at New York University's Glucksman Ireland House, 1 Washington Mews, Greenwich Village. Call 212-998-3950 for more information.

Fiddler Martin Hayes and guitar-mandolin player Dennis Cahill will be in a concert sponsored by the Shamrock Traditional Irish Music Society at 7:30 p.m. on Sat., Oct. 2, at the Fairfield Theatre Company's Stage One, 70 Sanford St., Fairfield, Conn. Call 203-259-1036 for tickets.



Pianist extraordinaire Steve Kuhn.

Fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh and another inspired partner of his, Kerry button accordionist and singer Brendan Begley, will be performing together at 8 p.m. on Sat., Oct. 16, at the Coatesville Cultural Society, 143 E. Lincoln Highway, Coatesville, Pa. (610-486-2220); from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Thurs., Oct. 21, in Boston College's Connolly House, 300 Hammond St., Chestnut Hill, Mass. (617-

552-3938); and at 8 p.m. on Fri., Oct. 22, at the Gaelic-American Club, 74 Beach Rd., Fairfield, Conn. (203-243-5508).

And as a non-Irish musical recommendation, I encourage anyone who relishes great jazz piano playing to attend a rare, completely solo concert by Steve Kuhn at 8 p.m. on Sat., Sept. 18, at The Stone, 16 Avenue C (near E. Second St.), lower Manhattan (www.thestoney.com).