

Old haunts

The B&B owners of Achill had high hopes for *The Banshees of Inisherin* and not just for the Oscars. Rather, we hoped that it might do for the island what *The Quiet Man* did for Cong in terms of tourism success. The business *Banshees* brought to the island during filming in September and October 2021 was very welcome. We were nearly more disappointed than the actors and production crew when, despite all their nominations, they came away from the Academy Awards empty-handed.

There's no doubt that bookings have increased across the board in Achill this year, and I think we can thank Martin McDonagh's gorgeous shots of Achill for that. Saying that, I've been surprised to find that many of our first-time-in-Achill guests have never even heard of, never mind seen, the film. It's so easy to make assumptions.

Achill Island has been a tourism destination since the mid-1800s. Proselytising Protestant minister Reverend Edward Nangle established his mission settlement, known as The Colony, in Dugort in 1834. Five years later, he built the Slievemore Hotel, named after what was thought to be the island's highest mountain, to house visitors to the mission. The work he did in building schools, an orphanage, a hospital, a printing press, a dispensary, a post office and a church was to benefit his followers and converts, as was the sustenance he provided in the form of soup during successive food shortages that culminated in the Great Famine of 1847-48.

So many islanders converted to Protestantism to feed their starving children that the Colony attracted the attention of the Pope himself, who wrote to Archbishop John McHale to chastise him for neglecting his Achill flock and causing them to 'take the soup'.

In response, Dr McHale arranged for the building of a Franciscan monastery on the island, a project that set off a bitter public feud with Mr Nangle that even the courts couldn't resolve. Protestant observers began to question Mr Nangle's proselytising methods,

Achill resident **Roisin Lavelle** credits *The Banshees of Inisherin* with some of the island's recent popularity, but it's the legacy of its ancestry that's the real star – including her mother-in-law's B&B

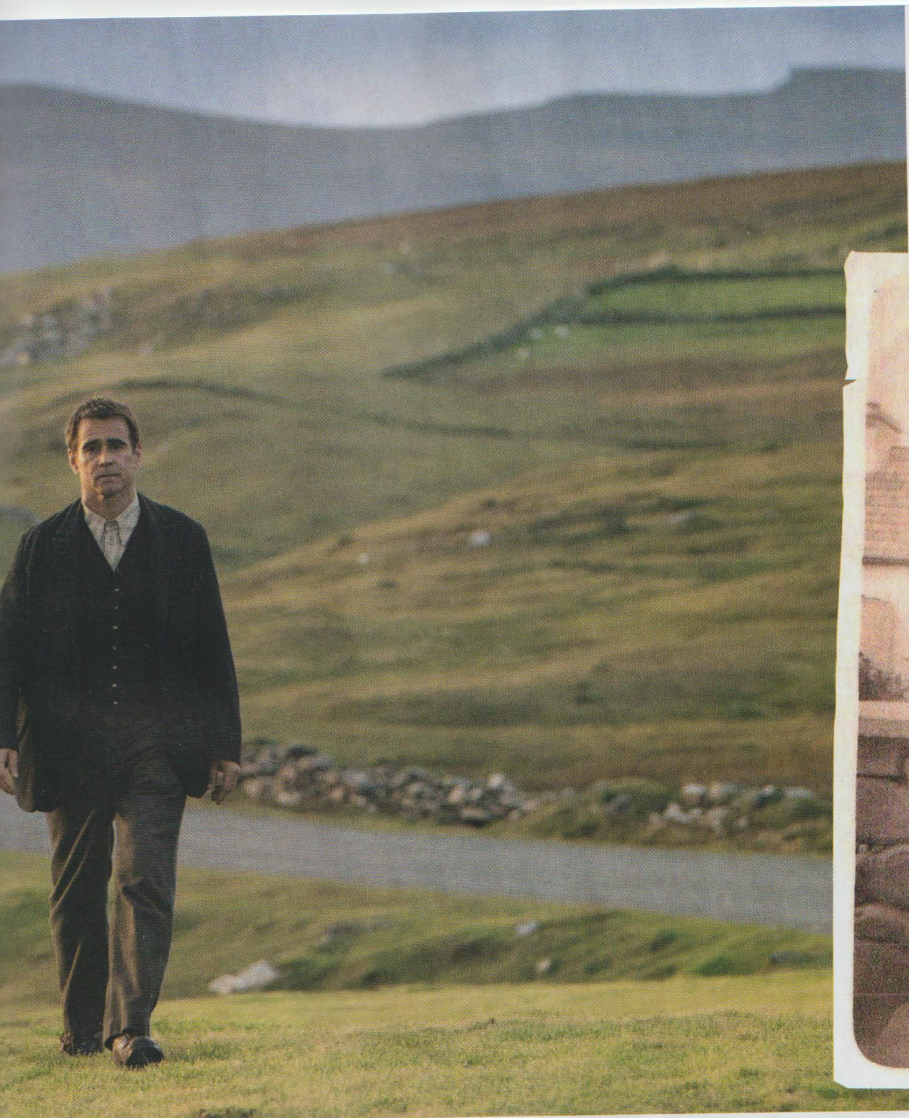


BEFORE THE WAIL OF BANSHEES

and he eventually lost the support of his donors, leaving him with no choice but to leave Achill in 1852.

The construction of a pivoting wooden bridge into Achill Sound in 1887 was followed by the extension to Achill of the Midland and Great Western Railway in 1895. The railway company's romantic advertising posters of paintings by artist Paul Henry attracted travellers to the west coast of Connaught, where Irish was the native tongue.

Known as Connemara, the region stretched from the Erris peninsula to the Galway-Clare border and included its offshore islands. Achill Island became a popular destination thanks to its wild beauty, and horse-drawn tourist cars transported travellers from the new train station near the Sound to the Slievemore Hotel. During their stay they were brought around the island to enjoy hill walking and angling. They



Colin Farrell as Pádraic in *The Banshees of Inisherin*, with miniature donkey Jenny. Below, Achill host Cathy Lavelle with Anthony Jack on the wall outside her old family cottage in Dooagh



discovered the local flora and hunted the local fauna – even seals – all while observing the primitive lifestyles of often destitute islanders.

With this long tourism tradition, some of Achill's current accommodation providers are second, or even third, generation hosts. An example of this longevity is the lovely Bervie guesthouse on Keel Strand, where artist Paul Henry lodged in the early 1900s after Dugort became "too touristic" for him. Elizabeth and John are the third generation of the Barrett/Gallagher family to run it.

Tourism continued to grow on the island, meaning more women were able to get seasonal work in hospitality. In the 1960s, my husband Michael's mother Cathy Lavelle was working in the well-regarded Achill Head Hotel, where guests would dress formally for the weekly residents' dinner dance. Michael tells me that local



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young lads would ask each other "Are you going to the dance on Saturday?" and those who said they were met up at the hotel, where they stood outside to watch the proceedings through the window. His father, Anthony Jack, worked in the hotel bar at night and fished during the day for the finest lobsters that he'd sell to the hotel for £3/10s for 13, a baker's dozen. The hotel owners asked Cathy to take some of their overflow guests in her nearby home, Ardevin, that overlooked Keel strand.

She had always been an early adopter of modern facilities and was one of the first in the village to fit an indoor bathroom and toilet. She also had a wind-up telephone when even the garda barracks across the road had no phone, and she purchased a gas cooker while most homes still depended on an open-turf fire or range.

Achill women were industrious

and accustomed to hard graft out of necessity, as their men had to leave Ireland for work. It was difficult to make ends meet, and Cathy often praised 'The Merchant' Patrick Sweeney in Achill Sound for the way he looked after local families, giving them credit until their husbands and sons returned from the tattie hoking in Scotland or construction work in England. While most were anxious to repay their debts, there were some who'd never paid, and she was sure The Merchant must have suffered many losses.

Cathy soon began keeping her own guests, most of whom arrived by bus and stayed for a fortnight. She swore later she'd never asked strangers to share a bed, but Michael reckoned there was such demand that many would beg to share. They got their bed and breakfast and they could also have a three-course dinner for seven shillings and six pence. Every »

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» day Cathy would make a big pot of soup and roast joint of meat, usually hogget (year-old lamb). Dessert could be jelly and custard, rice pudding or semolina with tinned fruit. Achill was bursting at the seams with visitors in the 1960s and '70s, with every second house doing B&B for the season.

The Sandybanks in Keel was awash with tents, and some of the campers came to Ardevin for breakfast and/or dinner too. Cathy's weekly order from the travelling shop was 12lbs of rashers and 12lbs of sausages. She had lots of regular guests who stayed in one of two large bedrooms, one for girls and the other for lads.

Having five sons, she preferred keeping lads in both rooms and she was like a second mother to them, even doing their laundry to keep them presentable. Achill was infamous for late nights and sing-songs in its heyday. The tongue-in-cheek answer if anyone asked what time the pub would close would be "October". Everyone stayed out late, and Cathy would let the lads sleep until 3pm and then give them breakfast.

One young fellow who came from Cork every year would give Cathy all his money on his arrival, and she'd dole it out to him throughout his stay. He'd meekly ask: "Mrs Lavelle, could I please have £5 for tonight?"

He declared that he'd never gone home to Cork with money in his pocket until he started staying in Ardevin. Cathy's children slept in the rooms below the kitchen for the season, which began in earnest on the June bank holiday and eased at the end of August. Her regular guests continued to visit her and her family in Ardevin for years afterwards.

With this background, it wasn't too surprising that in August 1987, when we completed the renovation of Cathy's century-old family cottage in Dooagh where Michael had been born and her brother Patrick still lived, Michael was willing to trial keeping guests for the rest of the month in the newly christened 'Teach Cruachán' (Hill House). Apart from the three years we leased The Village Inn in

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Keel, we've done B&B in Dooagh every season since then.

The advent of foreign sun holidays in the early 1970s had been the start of the decline of Ireland's traditional seaside resorts but it became quickly precipitous.

To illustrate this, when we opened in 1987 there were 24 B&Bs from the top of the Brae in Dooagh to Keem Bay. Now there are three B&Bs with signs out. In the parish of Achill, which includes the Currane peninsula, at that time there were more than 80 B&Bs, 12 hotels, seven guesthouses, one hostel and several affordable old cottages available to rent for a week or two.

Now, in 2023, Achill has 12 B&Bs, three hotels, two guesthouses, two hostels and more than a dozen holiday home estates. I don't know how many self-catering houses are available, but there are 146 'places' listed on Airbnb as I write. It's great to see some of the local women now offering rooms for rent in their homes via AirBnB, as they're badly needed during the season.

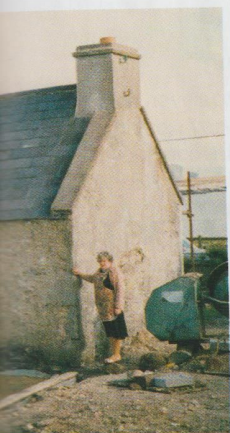
Achill has lots of loyal visitors: successive generations of families, groups of friends who met each other, and often their future spouses, on holidays here 40 years ago, and many who came on honeymoon to Achill. A regular guest, Martin, has come from Greystones every August for over 50 years. We're always delighted to see our loyal guests, but sustainable tourism depends on new business.

More US visitors every year are finding us now, and they're loving the authenticity of Achill's natural beauty and her local people. Many of them have Irish roots, and visitors from Cleveland, with which Achill has been twinned for 20 years, are excited to meet their relations here. We had a guest last week who was able to visit the house where her father was born, thanks to her relatives in Kildavnet who looked after her during her stay. Our final guests of the season were a group of eight friends from Ohio State University. They'd attended a classmate's wedding in England and one of the group, Katherine McNeeley, convinced the rest to come with her to Achill



for two nights so she could visit her granny's sister here. They had a great time hiking the trails and seeing all the sights.

Bookings for self-catering houses are very strong, meaning there is potential to extend the tourist season, if only the pubs and restaurants could find enough staff to stay open. This isn't only Achill's story; all over the country hospitality businesses are finding it harder to get staff. Fewer young people are willing to take on hospitality work. All I know is that the youngsters who worked with us, including our own, have



Right, Cathy Lavelle at age 95 with a portrait of her done by American painter Robert Henri, a regular visitor to Achill, in 1924

Left from top, the rear of the original cottage in 1986; after renovations in 1987; Tom and Jacqui Livesey who honeymooned on the island and return regularly

Inset below, Bunnacurry Monastery on Achill



matured into fabulous adults who can hold a conversation with anyone. Today's kids are missing out on a great opportunity to improve their communication skills, not to mention all the other transferable skills they gain. Customer care experience would stand to them.

Michael and I will carry on in the B&B for as long as we're able. After 36 years and five (or was it six?) renovations we still enjoy meeting new people and welcoming returning guests. We're particularly enjoying our Americans visitors, who are absolutely delighted to be in Ireland and so curious about our



way of life. The description "innocents abroad" comes to mind at times. Naturally, there have been ups and downs through the years. On the upside, we've been blessed with all the great friends we've made. We were lucky to be able to live and work at home while raising our children, Ciara and Michael Jnr, even if they weren't delighted about bunking in with us on airbeds to give us an extra room to let for a few weeks, just like their dad's summers in Ardevin.

They've both left home now, and luckily for us they're living in Ireland. Their rooms are waiting for them whenever they come home, as we've downsized to four guest rooms. We're so proud of them, and we're thrilled with our new incarnations as Grannie and Grandad.

There have been ups and downs throughout the years, but thankfully the downs have been few and far between. Nothing has ever been seriously damaged, nothing of value ever stolen, and I don't feel the need to touch wood. Guests know they're being welcomed into our home and we want to make them as comfortable as possible, and they always respect us, our home, and the other guests in return. We've been repaid tenfold for our modest efforts.

We've also been embarrassed a few times, once by a stray cat who brought her kittens through an open window into an occupied guest room and hid them behind a bedside locker. Luckily the guests were cat lovers. Usually, it was our Golden Retriever Cindy, who we lost in May at the age of 13, who made us blush. She once nicked a boot from a pair a guest left outside, and hid it up in the field. She attacked another guest's wetsuit as it hung on the clothesline and put a fine hole in it.

But it's children with no filters who'll often let down the front. One incident we'll never forget is when four-year-old Michael Jnr, who had an aversion to facial hair, bellowed as a hirsute guest carried his case down the stairs, "Mam, did the man with the beard pay?" ●