

Kilkelly

Over one hundred and thirty years after his great-grandfather left the small village of Kilkelly in Co. Mayo, Peter Jones found a bundle of letters sent to his great-grandfather by his father in Ireland. The letters continued from 1860 until the old man's death in 1890. Though not exceptional in any way, they tell of family news, births, deaths, sales of land, and bad harvests. They also remind the son that he is still loved, missed and remembered by his family in Ireland. He, in the course of time, marries and has a family in America. One letter tells him that his brother who emigrated to England had returned and is thinking of buying land. The final letter, written by another brother, informs him that his father, whom he has not seen for thirty years, has died. And so the last tangible link with home is broken. Peter Jones used his great-great-grandfather's letters to make a song which he called 'Kilkelly.' The song was passed on to three Irish musicians living in the USA: Mick Moloney, Jimmy Keane, and Robbie O'Connell are professional musicians who make their living playing music with a strong traditional base. Mick, Jimmy and Robbie have made 'Kilkelly' their own. It has become emblematic of the kind of immigrant culture they try to bring out in their music. As far as Mick knows it's the only song written 'from the language of emigrant letters not just in the Irish culture in America but to the best of my knowledge, in any ethnic culture in this country.'

The song has had a deep effect on all audiences. It touches in some fundamental way on the spirit of the emigrant experience. Wherever it is sung people are moved to tears (as witnessed by this writer at a concert in Philadelphia). Mick describes 'Kilkelly' as 'the most eloquent and poignant tale of what it is like to be separated ... the loneliness and the despair of it.'

Kilkelly

Kilkelly Ireland eighteen and sixty, my dear and loving son John,
Your good friend and school master Pat McNamara so good as to write these words
down.

Your brothers have all gone to find work in England, the house is all empty and sad,
The crop of potatoes is sorely infected a third to a half of them bad.

Your sister Bridget and Patrick O'Donnell they're going to be married in June,
Your mother says not to work on the railroad and be sure to come on home soon.

Kilkelly Ireland eighteen and seventy, my dear and loving son John,
Hello to your misses and to your four children and may they grow healthy and
strong.

Michael has got in a wee bit of trouble I guess that he never will learn,
Because of the dampness there's no work to speak of and now we have nothing to
burn.

Bridget is happy you named a child for her although she has six of her own,
You say you found work but you don't say what kind or when you will be coming
home.

Kilkelly Ireland eighteen and eight, dear Michael and John my sons.
I'm sorry to bring you the very sad news your dear old mother is gone.
We buried her down at the Church in Kilkelly, your brothers and Bridge were there,
You don't have to worry, she died very quickly, remember her in your prayers.
And it's so good to hear that Michael's returning, with money he's sure to buy land.
For the crop has been poor and the people are selling as fast as they can.

Kilkelly Ireland eighteen and ninety, my dear and loving son John
I suppose that I must be close on eighty, it's thirty years since you've gone.
Because of all the money you've sent me I'm still living out on my own,
Michael has built himself a fine house and Bridget's daughters are grown.
Thank you for sending your family pictures, they're lovely young women and men,
You say that yo might even come for a visit, what joy to see you again.

Kilkelly Ireland eighteen and ninety-two, my dear brother John,
I'm sorry I didn't write sooner to tell you that father is gone.
He was living with Bridget, she says he was happy and healthy down to the end,
Ah you should have seen him play with the grandchildren of Pat McNamara your
friend.

And we buried him alongside of mother down at Kilkelly churchyard.
He was a strong and feisty old man, considering his life was so hard.

And it's funny the way he kept talking about you, he called for you at the end,
Oh why don't you think about coming to visit, what joy to see you again.