

Remembering the great dance master

Jerry Molyneux at his graveside

– an article from the Kerryman Newspaper by Dónal Nolan - June 15 2018



Jerry Molyneux dancing with
Mountcoal's Sheila Bowler (née Lyons)

One of the most important figures of a cultural chain stretching back centuries is to be remembered in a special celebration at his north Kerry graveside on Sunday next, June 14.

The event takes place 45 years on from the famous unveiling of the gravestone of Irish dancing master Jerry Molyneux at his place of rest at Gale Cemetery in his native Gunsboro.

The late Jack Flavin, a cousin of Molyneux, unveiled the stone with the late, great Bryan MacMahon giving the graveside oration.

A piping tribute was meanwhile played by the celebrated Dublin uilleann piper, Dan O'Dowd. It was all thanks to one of Jerry Molyneux's star pupils, Liam Tarrant, who fund-raised for the gravestone in a series of concerts around north Kerry in the lead up to the big day on June 17, 1973.

Another star pupil was also heavily involved on the day, afterwards leading the group over to Finuge where the sod was turned on Teach Siamsa.

"I was very privileged to have been his pupil, I think I was in third class in Murhur National School, Moyvane, when he came to the school and invited anyone interested to come along after classes to learn from him," Fr Ahern told The Kerryman.

"I'll never forget how I reacted to seeing him dance that day. 'I would like to show you now what I'll be teaching ye', he said before breaking into dance.

"When I saw his hornpipe steps I just thought I would never be able to do it. He had a beautiful pair of feet," Fr Ahern recalled.

As with masters of old, Jerry Molyneux would drift from one parish to the next in search of the most worthy students across his stomping ground of north Kerry, staying six weeks in each place before moving on. In doing so he preserved an age-old tradition of dance rooted deeply in Kerry.

"He had been taught in turn by Ned 'Batt' Walsh and may even have been taught by Ned Walsh's teacher too, a man called Moore, known as Móirín na Rince. It was a form of dance originally believed to have come, via Castleisland, from the brothers Uí Ceirín of Castlemaine," Fr Ahern explained.

But as with all vibrant cultural pursuits it was a tradition that was nothing if the practitioner could not live it fully and, in so doing, bend it to their own designs.

"He had made a little chair for himself which he sùgáned from the rubber of old bicycle tyres and used to sit by the fire in the home he shared with his brother, where I am told he used to tap out dances on his fingers. He would then get up to try them out. So he was very much a creative artist too in that respect."

Molyneaux's famous Blackbird set dance might have been the result of one of these fireside mind movements, a dance that has travelled across the world. And of course Siamsa Tíre, founded by Fr Ahern, helped bring the dance Molyneaux practiced to a new and international generation.

Now, Fr Ahern and friends are hoping to enjoy a similar ceremony to that which played out in '73. The upcoming event will also see the unveiling of a refurbished headstone as well as a new piece of sculpture at the grave. It depicts a pair of dancing shoes, in dancing pose, on a circular limestone plinth with the inscription "Bímís ag Rince" (Let us be dancing).

The piece was executed by the well-known Tralee artistic sculptor, Billy Leen. Relative Mike Flavin of Gunsboro will unveil the new sculpture at 7pm, and this will be followed by special tributes to Molyneaux's legacy, in music and dance, at the grave-side. An open invitation to this special event is extended to anybody and everybody with a connection to, or a special interest in, the Gunsboro dancing genius.