Review by Gerard Madden

Gerard Madden is a native of Whitegate, County Clare, and is the author of a number of books dealing the ancestry of Irish families, including the Maddens of County Galway.

Bog Irish Micks: The O’Brien Family from Scariff

by Kath Woodley.


In the 19th century when thousands of Irish arrived in New Zealand, they were frequently greeted with the derisive term ‘Bog Irish Micks.’ This then is the unusual title chosen by Kath Woodley to commemorate her ancestors the O’Briens of Moynoe, Scariff, Co. Clare who settled in New Zealand. Within a generation descendants became lawyers, bank managers, broadcasters, film makers and even an All-Black!

The story begins with John O’Brien (1816-1867) who resided beside Moynoe graveyard in a three roomed thatched cottage, the ruins of which can still be seen. He married first Bridget Hynes from Kiladerry, Broadford. They had Mary born 1855 and John 1856. Their mother died in 1856 and Mary and John were reared with their cousins, the Hynes family in Meelick, Whitegate. There Mary met, and married in 1873 William Burke of Meelick, Whitegate. Their grandson, Billy (the blonde) Burke, passed away on the 29 November 2011. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anam dílis. Her brother John O’Brien sailed from London to New Zealand, on the ship Hannibal in 1875. He was nineteen years of age. In 1879 he moved to New Zealand, married and reared a family.
John O’Brien of Moynoe married secondly Margaret Malone, Firpark, Bodyke in 1857. They had three boys Michael, Benjamin and Timothy and two girls Bridget and Margaret. John O’Brien died in February 1867 and his widow married the farm manager Robert Guerin in July of the same year. With him she had another eight children.

The five children of John O’Brien and Margaret Malone ended up in New Zealand. One of the finest memorials in Moynoe graveyard was erected by them. The author is descended from Benjamin who sailed from Plymouth to Sydney in 1880 when he was nineteen years old. He later went to New Zealand, enlisted in the armed constabulary and later joined the New Zealand Police Force. He married Elizabeth McDonough from the parish of Kilronan, Roscommon. They had nine children. They called their house Kincora.

The second son of Benjamin and Elizabeth O’Brien was John Gerald O’Brien. He made the All-Black rugby team for a tour of Australia in 1914 but had the misfortune to break his leg. He was also one of that unlucky generation of rugby players whose careers were disrupted by World War I. In all he made 12 appearances for the All-Blacks before retiring in 1919. Though only 1.73 metres tall and around 70kg he regularly played at fullback.

With the publication of this work a further valuable contribution has been made to honouring the memory of those Clare men and women who because of economic circumstances (as we have today) were forced to leave their homes and fatherland in search of a better life. The book is illustrated with over 500 photographs, sketches and drawings that complement and illuminate the text.

The author Kath Woodley can be justly proud of her achievements. It is a beautiful book worthy of a place in every household. The book is accompanied with a CD that contains a genealogical base of thousands of names, files of birth, marriage and death certificates, an orchestral piece by a Bryan O’Brien and mystery photos.

The cover design, a painting of Scariff by Vern Walker, shows clearly what a little colour and imagination can do for a place. Scariff has never looked better and I doubt if it ever will.

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