

Father O'Flynn – the man, the song.

The well-known ballad about Father O'Flynn has its origins deeply rooted in Sneem and connects two local clerical personalities, one Protestant, the other Catholic. The former, the Rev. Charles Graves, (1812 - 1899), Bishop of Limerick, with his entourage of wife, children and servants moved to Kerry every year to stay at Parknasilla, their summer home some three miles from the village of Sneem. Those visits were both long and frequent, earning the house the name of "The Bishop's House" by which it is known to this day. Their second son, Alfred Perceval Graves (1846 - 1931) became a career civil servant, but his real love lay in music, poetry and Celtic studies and he published regularly in books, magazines and journals. In his autobiography *"To Return to All That"* – named, and possibly written in response to his son Robert's earlier-published autobiography, *"Goodbye to All That"* – he gives an account of his youthful holidays spent around the village of Sneem when staying at their Parknasilla home. He credits Parknasilla as the place and source of inspiration for his songs *"Trotting to the Fair"* and *"A Jug of Punch"* and wrote that the Catholic parish priest of Sneem, Fr. Michael Walsh (c1793 - 1866) was used as the model for "Father O'Flynn" in the now famous eponymous ballad.

Known by his parishioners and friends as Father Mihil, (an Irish version of Michael), Walsh was the epitome of the hunting-shooting-fishing cleric, more typically found in the ranks of the nineteenth century Anglican Church rather than among those of his own persuasion. His career postings indicate that he was born about 1793, - the Kerry Diocesan Archive states Buttevant, Co. Cork and that he studied at Maynooth; however, his bishop mentions in Walsh's obituary that he was one of the last to study at the old seminary at Killarney and to add to the confusion Ida Graves, sister of the song's writer, mentions in her autobiography that he studied at St. Omer in France, which, however, is not probable. Whatever place is chosen for his schooling, it is clear that as a priest he would have been well-educated and that he came from a relatively wealthy background. At a time when rural communities had little wealth and survived principally on barter, only the wealthy "strong farmers" or merchants could afford the cash costs involved in educating one of their sons in the priesthood. The popular tradition – exemplified by an t-Athair Peadar O'Laoghaire in *Mo Sceal Fein* - of poverty-stricken peasant farmers struggling from dawn to dusk trying to earn the fees to keep their son in Maynooth may have been true in a very occasional case – for them it would be a heroic struggle to earn the annual fees of £25 for tuition and a similar amount for board & lodging over a sustained period of about 7 years. Although Maynooth College as the national seminary was endowed by the State, all students had to pay their own expenses and it was not until post-1845 that grants became available, so Catholic priests of the pre-Famine era inevitably came from comfortable landowning backgrounds.

Fr. Mihil was by all accounts an able priest but somewhat lax in his preaching habits and inefficient in his paperwork duties – he was wont to scribble details of births in a small book for later transcription into the Parish Register, an event that did not always happen. He spoke Irish fluently, preaching in that language (albeit very occasionally) and also helped as a translator for his parishioners at the local Petty Sessions. He was, according to local lore, a fine musician and a contributor to Petrie's collection of Irish tunes. Although local lore also recounts him to be a competent player of both the uilleann pipes and the fiddle, some clerical sources do not agree, notably Archdeacon O'Sullivan of Kenmare who recorded in a diary

entry for August 1855 *"Mihill is forever at the fiddle and still as great a botch at it as ever I would hate to hear."*

Hunting – in South Kerry this means hunting the hare on foot with hounds – shooting and fishing were Fr. Mihil's passions, usually to the dismay of his superiors. His exploits and prowess in the field were renowned and endure in local folk memory. His gun would have been a flint-lock muzzle-loader, so he would have carried a powder-horn and a bag with shot and a spare flint or two, another for the wads and rags used in charging the gun, along with a bag for carrying whatever game he brought down. It is commonly related that his shooting gear went everywhere with him, even when he went on a sick call, so he was festooned like a Christmas tree on the chance that his horse or dog would put up a bird and give him the opportunity for a shot.

On one occasion, in an effort to reduce the expense of gunpowder, Fr. Mihil with the local doctor tried manufacturing their own but in drying the subsequent mixture it exploded, knocking them out, blowing the roof, windows and doors from his outhouse. The resulting injuries led to an absence from his ministerial duties for about six months; not only did the explosion very nearly finish his life, it drew the wrath of his Bishop and also nearly finished his career as priest to the parish of Sneem. In addition to a hawk and several pet jackdaws, the latter often following him about the village, he always kept about nine dogs, greyhounds for coursing, pointers and retrievers. His clothing when hunting was not in keeping with the norm of the day, and was individualistic to put it mildly. A permanent fixture on his head was a Jim Crow hat (a type of hat made popular in the 1830's similar in shape to a witch's hat with the top of the cone lopped off) and when on the bog after snipe he wore a coat of buffalo hide with the hair still on it. He also had holes bored in his boots to allow the water run out more easily. These unusual attributes, coupled with a liking to pepper his conversation with large and obtuse words, was a recipe to make him the object of some derision in Catholic Church circles and provoke the condescending remarks of his brother clergymen in neighbouring parishes, who disparaged his garb and his unclerical demeanour.

Perhaps some of the animosity shown by his fellow clerics derived from Fr. Mihil's friendship with the local gentry. His work as a translator would have necessitated close contact with the Bench at the Petty Sessions and, as a popular local priest, his input would have been invaluable. His demeanour as a priest and a man would have been clear to the magistrates. He would have a shared love of wildlife and field sports as a common interest with them; we know that the Blands of Derryquin Castle employed several gamekeepers. Also, friendship with the landlords was also a necessity, as Fr. Mihil would have needed permission to shoot over their lands or risk being taken up for poaching. Even today, anyone who has shot with a priest will know and appreciate the huge amount of local help and advice given to locate quarry ("There's always woodcock by that bush over there Father, I even saw one going in last night!"). That help and assistance is not always granted to the owner of the sporting rights, a fact that the Blands would have been well aware of, and would have recognized with a wry smile. Ida, daughter of Bishop Graves, said that Fr. Mihil was a good friend of her family and throughout the parish was beloved by Protestants and Catholics alike. She emphasised the close links between her father and Mihil, and recounted the story of the Catholic bishop coming to hold a confirmation at Sneem, saying *"...it was we who lent plates, knives, forks, and table linen for the lunch which followed the ceremony, and there was a perfect understanding between us."*

Other than information from the condescending diary entries of his Kenmare colleague, most of the written history about Fr. Mihil comes from the Anglo-Irish tradition, from the writings of James Franklin Fuller, Ida Graves and her brother Alfred. While all tend to have a flavour of "paddywhackery" about them when discussing their native Irish neighbours, it is very clear in their writings that Fr. Mihill was a special person, much loved and admired by them. James Franklin Fuller (1835-1924), the scion of the Glashnacree landlord family, who as a boy went coursing with him regularly, in his autobiography wrote about his departure for boarding school ".....next to father and mother, the person that I miss most was the fine old parish priest, Father Welsh; with whom I often put in a strenuous day's coursing...."

There are two slightly different stories surrounding the background to the ballad that has immortalized the sporting cleric. The first relates that AP Graves, living in London, one morning on his way to work crossed through St James' Park and the words for "*Father O'Flynn*" came to him to the tune of "*The Top of Cork Road*" and on arriving at his office he was able to jot them down. Another version of the origin of this song is from James Bland of Derryquin Castle, who was a student at Trinity College Dublin at the same time as his cousin A. P. Graves and Sir Charles Stanford. In a piece in the "Irish Times" newspaper Bland says the three were socialising in his rooms and he was whistling a jig, an old tune known as "*The Top of the Cork Road*" that his nurse had often sung to him when a child in Derryquin. Stanford asked him to sing it again & took down the music; turning to Graves he said "You must put words to this tune". The latter did so, choosing for his subject Father Mihil, and slightly changing the names of places and that of the priest to make the lines scan.

The story, however, does not end there; A. P. Graves had parted with his rights to the publisher of his songs for a lump sum payment of £80. In later life he used to say that for his song "*Father O'Flynn*" he had received only £ 1-12-0, his original fee when it was published in the *Spectator* (in 1882), although it made a fortune for the publisher and also for his friend Sir Charles Stanford as composer. That story is given credence by Robert Graves, son of Alfred Percival, who in his autobiography mentions that his father once impressed upon him almost religiously never to sell for a once-off sum the complete rights of any work of his whatsoever. This, no doubt, is a reference to his experience with "*Father O'Flynn*." It proved to be good advice; Robert earned substantial royalty income from his writing, which included "*I Claudius*" from which a very successful TV series was made.

Father O'Flynn

Of priests we can offer a charmin variety,
Far renound for learnin and piety;
Still, I'd advance ye widout impropriety,
Father OFlynn as the flowr of them all.

***Chorus:** Heres a health to you, Father OFlynn,
Slainte and slainte and slainte agin;
Powrfullest preacher, and tinderest teacher,
And kindest creature in ould Donegal.*

Dont talk of your Provost and Fellows of Trinity,
Famous foriver at Greek and Latinity,
Dad and the divils and all at Divinity
Father OFlynn 'd make hares of them all!

Come, I vinture to give ye my word,
Never the likes of his logic was heard,
Down from mythology into thayology,
Truth! and conchology if he'd the call.

Och Father OFlynn, youve a wonderful way wid you,
All ould sinners are wishful to pray wid you,
All the young childer are wild for to play wid you,
Youve such a way wid you, Father avick.

Still for all youve so gentle a soul,
Gad, youve your flock in the grandest control,
Checking the crazy ones, coaxin onaisy ones,
Lifting the lazy ones on wid the stick.

And tho quite avoidin all foolish frivolity;
Still at all seasons of innocent jollity,
Where was the playboy could claim an equality,
At comicality, Father, wid you?

Once the Bishop looked grave at your jest,
Till this remark set him off wid the rest:
"Is it lave gaiety all to the laity?
Cannot the clergy be Irishmen, too?

*The Irish Poems of Alfred Perceval Graves: Countryside Songs, Songs and Ballads Dublin:
Maunsel,*