

'All the world's a stage...'

A life in amateur dramatics, 1940 - 1980.

By Mick Waddell

Prologue:

For forty years amateur drama was one of the great interests in my life. Indeed it was more than an interest and at times was almost an obsession. During that time I was involved with various groups but mainly with three dramatic societies and, while they all overlapped with one another and from time to time I worked with or appeared in other productions, my stage career falls roughly into three parts, - let's call them 'acts'.



Mick Waddell

Act One: Scene One 'A Tramps' Ball'

Scene: The Town Hall, Newry.

The time: Spring, 1940.

(I enter, stage right, dressed as a tramp.)

My involvement with amateur drama, which was to play such a very important role in my life, began at a 'Tramps' Ball' in Newry Town Hall in the spring of 1940. At that time I was working in O'Hagan and O'Hare's Chemist Shop in Hill Street, Newry and was very

friendly with Frank Sweeney and Benny Corr. Frank, a chemist by profession, was a noted traditional fiddler. He worked with me in the chemist's while Benny, who was from Sheeptown, worked for the Ministry of Agriculture. He seemed to spend most of his time looking for eel-worms around Kilkeel about which there was much concern at that time. He was a dashing young fellow who rode a motorbike, wore a leather jacket and smoked a pipe – a really fashionable man-about-town. They were great characters and we knocked about together.

Anyway, they were going to a 'Tramps' Ball' in

the Town Hall and they encouraged me to dress up and go too. There was a prize of £5 for the best 'tramp' and as far as I can recall it was organised by *Clann Ulaid* Hurling team. The judge of the competition was Sean Mooney, a famous tenor at the time. I was living in 'digs' in Newry during the week and cycling home to the 'Pass at the weekends. So I got myself dressed and 'acted the eejit' to such an extent that I won the competition for the best 'tramp' and, more importantly, the fiver, which was a big sum of money in 1940.

Act one; Scene two; The Colmcille Players

*Scene: A Chemist's Shop, Hill Street, Newry.
The time; A few days later.*

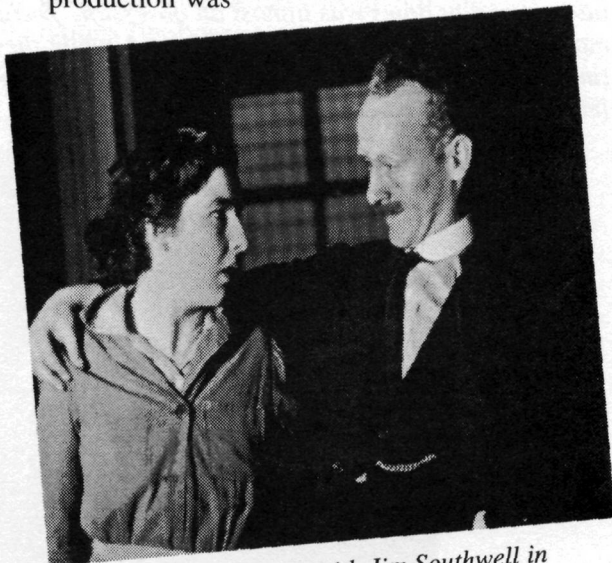
(Enter Jim Southwell, a postman)

Now the postman who delivered the letters to O'Hagan and O'Hare's was a fellow called Jim Southwell. On the Monday after the 'Tramps' Ball', Jim came in with the post and he asked me if I would be interested in joining a new dramatic society. I believe he had seen my antics in the Town Hall at the ball for I had no stage-experience. I agreed to go the following night to a meeting of a group in a room on The Mall, not far from the old Imperial Cinema.

In Newry at the time there was a drama group called 'The Abbey Players' and they were famous the length and breadth of the country for the quality of their productions. My friend, Frank Sweeney, was a prominent member. Many of their cast were legendary in Newry Dramatic circles- Ethel Fitzpatrick, Jimmy Canavan, Kathleen Bell (O'Donnell), Mick Mathers, - but as with many another organisation there had been a 'split'. A group of members who were unhappy with some aspect of 'The Abbey Players' had broken away and it was this breakaway group that I was invited to join. They were in the process of getting organised and had taken the name 'The Colmcille Players'. Jim Southwell, the aforementioned postman, was a leading light. Now there were quite a few nice young lassies in the fledgling group, so what more encouragement did I need? I got involved right

away!

The first play that we did was 'Give Him a House' by George Shiels, the great Ulster playwright, whose works were, and still are, very popular. Our producer was Dan White who was Principal of Ballyholland Primary School. Dan was a Belfast man and had been very involved in drama before he came to the Newry area. He was a wonderful producer. That first production was



Mary Mathers with Jim Southwell in 'Give him a house'



*'Macooks's Corner'
L to R Mick Waddell, Louis Sloan, Oliver Keenan
and Jim Southwell*

very well received and we got excellent reviews in the local press. I played Archie, a deaf fellow in the play and it happened that Mary Mathers, my future wife, was playing the part of Josephine. In one scene in the play, Josephine had to make tea for Archie and little did either of us think that Mary would make tea for me many thousands of times in the years to come! Our next production was another George Shiels play, 'Macooke's Corner', and this was really a big hit for me. There's a reason for most things in this world and the reason I was a big hit is this; I was playing the part of Adam Lilley. Now Adam Lilley is a 'half-wit' so I had only to be myself to be in line for an Oscar!

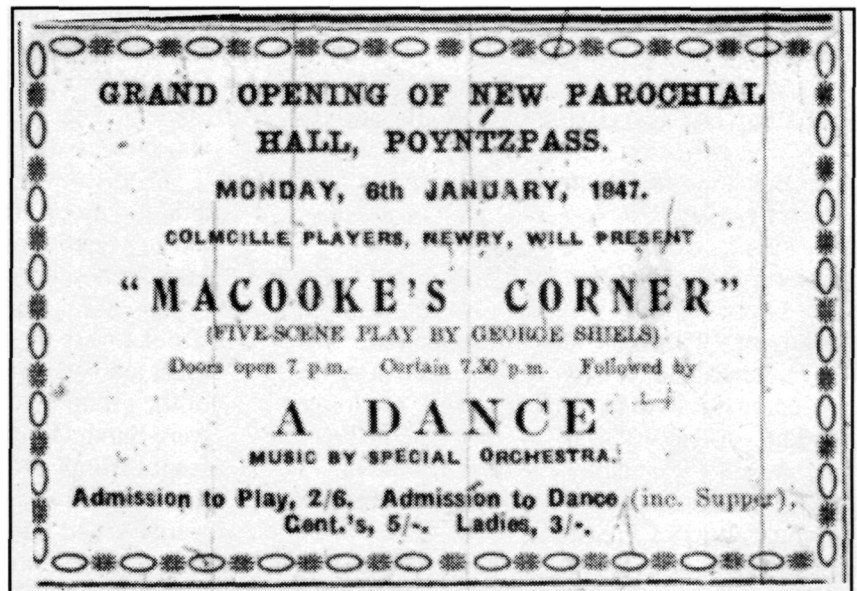
We toured all of South Down and South Armagh with 'Macooke's Corner' playing in halls packed to the rafters.

Around that time there was a drama course in Belfast in the Ulster Group Theatre and Jim Southwell had the idea that he and I should go. By that time I had got really very interested, so we went and learned quite a lot.

Another George Shiels play 'The Caretakers' followed. I played the part of a character 'Joss Nabley' who went around challenging people to fight. His line was, "Will you box me?" Anyway that play was to change my life.

After the rehearsal one night, while the cast and the rest of the company were having a cup of tea, Mary Mathers suddenly exclaimed, "Oh Lord! I'm going to get killed! I forgot, I was supposed to collect sleeping-tablets for my grandmother!" I said, "Don't worry about that. Sure I'll get them for you." For I had the keys of the Chemist's in my pocket.

So after the tea, Mary and I went round to O'Hagan and O'Hare's and I opened the side door and we went in and I got the tablets for the granny. Now when we were coming out I switched off all the lights and the inevitable



Grand Opening of Poyntzpass Parochial Hall

happened! I grabbed Mary and had a bit of 'a houl' Well that was the start and as they say, "the rest is history!" Romance blossomed and we became regulars at the first house in the Imperial and the second house in the Savoy.

The Colmcille Players did several one-act plays. I remember particularly 'A Minute's Wait' in which we had to have a goat on stage. (On one famous occasion at Whitecross, the goat, which was tethered outside ready to be brought in when needed, escaped - or more likely was deliberately released - and half the cast spent a considerable time running round a field, in the dark, trying to catch it!)

Another memorable occasion for me with The Colmcille Players was when we performed 'Macooke's Corner' at the opening of Poyntzpass Parochial Hall in January 1947.

Next we did 'The Jailbird', yet another George Shiels play. Then disaster struck us for Dan White, our inspirational producer, died suddenly. Dan's death left a terrible void but after some time, Jim Fitzsimmons took over as producer. Jim had a different approach to drama altogether and, while he was excellent in his own way, things just weren't the same. He was very precise and marked the stage where each actor had to be at various times in a scene. We struggled on for a while but in truth the

enthusiasm of *'The Colmcille Players'* died with Dan White.

Act Two: The Jerrettspass Dramatic Society

Scene: A shop in Poyntzpass village.

The time: Circa 1951.

(Enter Pat Byrne, actor and producer)

In August 1950 Mary and I took the long walk down the aisle in Newry Cathedral and after that we came to live in Poyntzpass. I no longer worked in Newry but in the Chemist's in Poyntzpass and one day Pat Byrne came in.

Now I had been a member of the Jerrettspass Young Farmers Club, and I knew Pat well. Pat knew Mary and he knew that we had been involved in amateur drama. (Pat's father and mother were natives of Poyntzpass. His

grandfather, John Byrne was a shoemaker who lived and worked in the house that is now TPM Credit Union Office, where the Local History Society meets. Indeed Pat's father, Joe Byrne was born in that house.)

Anyway, Pat invited Mary and I to join a drama group from Jerrettspass, and we did, as did my next door neighbour, Colin Baxter. The Jerrettspass group had been going for years before we joined. Pat Byrne and Maureen Brooks were their producers and they had some great actors and actresses. Some of the stalwarts of the group who appeared in many productions were Sarah O'Hare, Patrick James O'Hare, Joan Irwin, Hugh Magee, Mick Mc Nulty, Hugh McConville and Minnie Savage. These players were backed up by an enthusiastic, experienced and talented support staff back-stage, which is such a vital element in the success of any dramatic society. The first play they did in



'Home is the Hero'

L to R Patrick James O'Hare, Hugh Magee with Kathleen Brooks



'Home is the Hero'

L to R Maureen Brooks, Maura Burns, Pat Byrne, Mick McNulty and Hugh Magee

which we were involved was a one-act play called *'The Coiner'*. That was followed by a production of *'The Pope in Killybuck.'*

Pat Byrne, as well as producing, was also a very talented actor. He was a man of great vision and he decided that if we were going to do plays and tour the country with them, then we were going to aim high. He set out to attain a standard where we would go to all the major Drama Festivals. He wanted to compete at the highest level in amateur dramatics. So in the years that followed Jerrettspass Dramatic Society competed regularly at the Newry, Portadown, Lisburn, Bangor, Dundalk and Warrenpoint Drama Festivals. Twice we were nominated to go forward to the All-Ireland Finals, which were held in Athlone.

Pat was a perfectionist. I well remember once when we were rehearsing *'The New Gosoon'* in Glenn Hall that at 2 o'clock in the morning he threw down the script and made us do the whole play all over again.

However all that was forgiven and forgotten

when the hard work paid off and the following Saturday night we went to Newry Drama Festival and won the cup.

Of course one of the perils of competing in drama festivals was that you were at the mercy of the adjudicator. An audience might love the play and we might get a standing ovation but then the adjudicator might tear our production to pieces. However we learned a great deal from good adjudicators and often would change something because of what an adjudicator might have said.

Sometimes this improved our next performance, but, just like doctors, adjudicators differ and what pleased one might annoy another. I recall a particular case of this with Walter Macken's play *'Home is the Hero'*. This was a very successful play for us and we were nominated to go to the All-Ireland Finals in Athlone. Mick McNulty, a really fine actor, was playing the part of Paddy O'Reilly in the play and portrayed him as 'a real hard man'. Now at Bangor Festival the adjudicator liked the production but

was critical of Mick's interpretation of the part of Paddy. I can't remember who the adjudicator was but he said that there was a soft side to Paddy that Mick had failed to bring out. We altered Mick's performance accordingly before going to the next festival where the adjudicator, Lennox Robinson, was critical because *he* saw Paddy as 'a real hard man'. Sometimes you just can't win! Incidentally Lennox Robinson was glowing in his praise of Pat Byrne in the role of the spiv 'Manchester' Monaghan describing his performance as the best he'd seen in many years. Pat won the best-actor medal at Athlone and was offered the chance to become a professional actor with the Abbey Theatre, Dublin as a result, but he turned it down. Many famous names were adjudicators at the various festivals and, apart from those I've mentioned elsewhere, I remember Cyril Cusack, Tomas Mac Anna, Ria Mooney and, my favourite adjudicator, Finlay J. McDonald.

In 'The Rugged Path' I played John Perry, an old, infirm man and I really got deeply interested in the part. I remember Sir Tyrone Guthrie saying when adjudicating at a Festival somewhere that an actor should "never copy from a copy, his advice was, *Always copy from*



Stage Staff

*L to R Billy McKee, Jim Sterritt,
Colin Baxter and Tom Whiteside*

an original." Now working in the chemist's shop in Poyntzpass I had ample opportunity to study some very original characters and I based my John Perry on one of them. There was an old bachelor who lived out in Loughadian by the name of Ownie Duffy. He was my model for John Perry.

Owne had a peculiar shuffling way of walking and a very hesitant way of speaking. He regularly borrowed a half-crown off me, and always punctually paid it back, but each time he approached the subject in a very nervous, uncertain way as if it was a totally new experience for him.

He would 'juke' in when there were no other customers in the shop and he'd fidget about and he'd start, "*I...I...I was wonderin'... I was wonderin' if you...I was wonderin' if...if...if... you could...could .. could lend me a half-a-crown till Friday!*"

So I made a study of Owenie's wee ways and was always glad to see him coming. Well 'The Rugged Path' was nominated to go to Athlone and we performed it there on the second Friday night of the finals. We stayed over for the final adjudication on the Sunday. Now we didn't get high marks overall for the play which was a big disappointment but I was nominated for the F.J. McCormack Medal for Best Actor.

There were ten nominees for the award and one by one the adjudicator, Sheila Richards of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, eliminated the other contenders until there were only two of us left. As each rival was eliminated the tension and excitement grew and the Jerretzpass contingent was ready to explode. However the medal didn't come my way. The adjudicator talked, as they do on such occasions, about the difficulty of her task but there could be only one winner etc., and it wasn't me. She felt sure I would win before long and what a wonderful character I had portrayed. Little did she know she was watching my attempt to copy a true original - poor, old Ownie Duffy from Loughadian! A year or two later I did win a best-actor medal at Dundalk Drama Festival in a play called 'The Resurrection'.

There are times when something going wrong on stage can ruin a scene or destroy a dramatic scene and turn it into farce but, occasionally, a



*Committee Members, stage staff, supporters and cast of Jerrettspass Dramatic Society.
The play 'Home is the Hero'*

mistake, particularly in a comedy, can improve the original. I remember that in Warrenpoint Town Hall we were doing a play called *'The Quiet Twelfth'* by Hugh Quinn. In the play I had to go up a ladder and when I was coming down the rungs of the ladder snapped, one after the other. I came down, bump! bump! bump! This caused great mirth. Later in the same play in one scene Maureen Brooks had to wash the dishes in a basin of water. She was supposed to set the basin on the table but, for some reason, she put it on a chair by mistake. Later in the scene Minnie Savage came in and when invited to sit down, she sat down in the basin of water. Needless to say the audience erupted. However like a true thespian Minnie sat steadfastly in the basin till the end of the scene!

Now while acting with the Jerrettspass group I was also doing a bit of producing, both with them under the watchful eye of Pat Byrne and with a group I had formed in Poyntzpass. In Jerrettspass we did many other plays including *'Boyd's Shop'*, *The Auction in Killybuck* and *'The Farmer Wants a Wife'* which were great crack. Incidentally, *'The Farmer Wants a Wife'* was written by Patricia O'Connor who was for a time a teacher in Fourtowns Primary School

near Poyntzpass - where she picked up the names *Bryson* and *Wylie* which she used in her play.

**Act Three: St Patrick's Dramatic Society,
Poyntzpass**

Scene: A converted Nissen hut alias the Parochial Hall, Poyntzpass.

Time: 1953?

Enter Jim McHale, Terry Murray, Nan Canavan and others.

Now, as I have said, during the time I was involved in Jerrettspass I was also working with a drama group in Poyntzpass where I was producer as well as actor. Our first production, and the first play I produced, was *'Professor Tim'* featuring Frank McCourt who was outstanding in the title-role. Mary and I always found involvement in drama gave us great pleasure but the one thing she detested was to be on the stage with me - and she had good reason. I was notorious for 'huffing' my lines while she was always word-perfect. Frank McCourt was even worse than I was in that respect! But the play was a great success and we did the rounds of all the local halls with it.



Poyntzpass Drama Group

*Back : L to R Frank McSherry, Mickey Daly, Mick Waddell, Pat Canavan, Terry Murray.
Front: Nan Canavan, Agatha Murray, Bridie McKee and Annie Murray.*

'Professor Tim' introduced many locals to the stage and people like Jim McHale, Nan, Pat and Tom Canavan, Mick Cavanagh, Terry and Agatha Murray, Frank McSherry, Mary Murphy, and Pat and Phil Monaghan were to be stalwarts of many productions in the years to come. These included 'Paul Twynning', 'The New Gossoon', 'Border Wine' 'The Farmer Wants a Wife', 'The Resurrection', 'A Minutes Wait', 'The Young Man from Rathmines', and 'Spreading the News.

Our involvement in amateur drama led to a great love of the theatre and Mary and I were regular visitors to the Group Theatre in Belfast and to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. In Belfast we had the pleasure of seeing the great stars of the Ulster Theatre in their prime, Margaret Darcy, R.H. McCandless, Joe Tumilty, Elizabeth Begley and J.G.Devlin. In the Abbey we enjoyed such legends as Sarah Allgood, Maire O'Neill, Barry Fitzgerald, F.J. McCormack,

Eileen Crowe and Harry Brogan.

But like every other human endeavour there were times when, for one reason or another, the dramatic society ceased to function for a year or two. It takes a lot of effort from a lot of people to produce perform and stage a play and sometimes the enthusiasm just wasn't there. So there'd be a year or two's rest and then we'd go again.

In 1970 the then curate in Poyntzpass, Fr Sean Quinn, was responsible for one such revival. He produced 'They Got What They Wanted', a comedy by Louis D'Alton in which I played the part of Bartley Murnaghan. It was a very big part with a lot of long speeches and big words. It was a very wordy play but it introduced a new generation to amateur drama. We took that play all round the country and I remember that it went down particularly well with the students in Dromantine College.

Following Fr Quinn's departure there was

another break. However throughout the 1970's I was regularly involved in short sketches in the 'Scor' competition and in 1978 the local Drama group performed 'Roots' a comedy written by Frank Watters. This grew out of one such short sketch. In it I played the part of a road man who got his kicks from misdirecting tourists. This was a very funny play which was much enjoyed both in Poyntzpass and Dromantine. It was my last performance on the local stage.

In 1981 or 1982 a Newry group decided to put on a show entitled 'The Good Old Days' and part of it was the famous Victorian melodrama 'Maria Marten or Murder in the Red Barn'. Mick Mathers, my brother-in-law, was one of the organisers and I was invited to play the role of the Stage-manager, a non-speaking part with plenty of scope for over-acting. I really enjoyed my return to Newry Town Hall and it was, I suppose, fitting that my final stage performance should be back where it had all started forty years before.

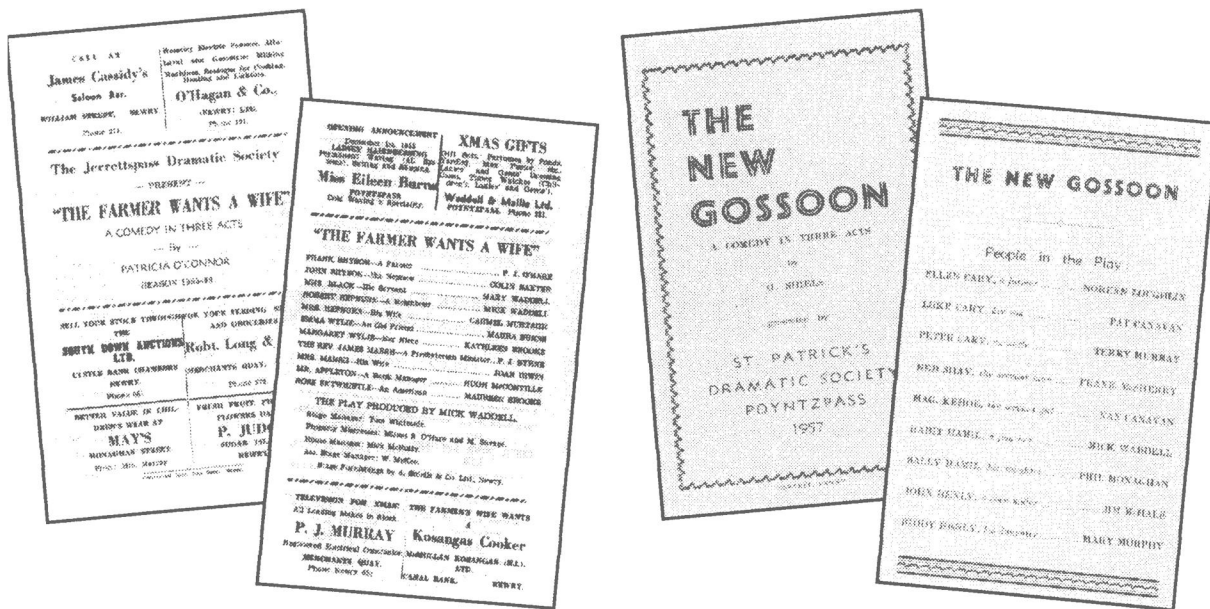
Epilogue:

Amateur drama has been one of the great pleasures of my life. I have made innumerable friends and have so many memories – of triumphs and fiascos in about equal measure! But it has been great fun and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. To be part of a

successful drama group is very satisfying. There can be few greater thrills than the sense of anticipation as the curtain opens on a first night and few more rewarding experiences than to have an audience in the palm of your hand with the ability to make them laugh one minute and cry the next.

The television era has been difficult time for amateur drama, but when a group of ordinary people come together on an autumn evening in an empty hall somewhere and decide to rehearse and stage a play they are embarking on a uniquely creative journey together. For when the play is chosen, and the producer is selected, and the play is cast, and the lines are learned, and the action rehearsed and rehearsed, and the props are gathered and the scenery is painted, and the costumes are begged and borrowed, let out or taken in, and the grease paint is applied, and the prompters are in place, and the lights are dimmed, and the curtain opens, maybe they will have a show. Maybe it will, for an hour or two some dark winter's night, transport an audience to another time and place and transform a plain country hall into a glamorous West End theatre or to the bright lights of Broadway.

***** Curtain *****



CHARACTERS

Dunley Murnaghan MICHAEL WADDELL
 Beola Murnaghan (his wife) NAN CANAVAN
 Sally Murnaghan (daughter) ANN McVEIGH
 Norah Murnaghan (daughter) ALANNA McCOOY
 Jack Murnaghan (son) SEAMUS MURPHY
 Derry Murnaghan (son) ROGER MAGENNIS
 Peter Murnaghan (son) JOHN McCOOY
 O'wey Tubidy (shopkeeper) TERENCE MURRAY
 Matty McGrath (gentleman farmer) MICHAEL CAVANAGH
 Joe McGrath (his son) FERGAL MURPHY
 Tom Cassidy (builder) FRANK McSHERRY

Stage Managers :
 FRANK WATERS, SEAMUS MURPHY, JOHN McCOOY

Make-up :
 MICHAEL MATHERS

Production :
 REV. S. QUINN

POYNTZPASS AMATEUR DRAMATIC GROUP

in

They Got What They Wanted

A Farce in One Act
by
DOUG BRIDSON



St. Patrick's Dramatic Society
PRESENT

"PROFESSOR TIM"
 (A 3-act Comedy by George Skiale)

*2nd Contracted
 Not bound their money well
 if some of them it for
 Lethin, Kypashi*

<p style="text-align: center;">CAST :</p> <p>John Scally, a farmer Pat Flanagan Mrs. Scally, his wife Mrs. Nolan Peggy Scally, their daughter Mary Murphy Professor Tim, Mrs. Scally's brother Frank McCourt James Kilroy, a Rural Councillor Jim McNeil Mrs. Kilroy, his wife Agatha Murray Joseph Kilroy, their son Pat Cassara Hugh O'Gahan, a sporting farmer Tom Canavan Paddy Kilroy, his groom Mick Cavanagh Bill Flanagan, his housekeeper Ned Canavan Mr. Allison, an auctioneer Terry Murray</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ACTS I and III JOHN SCALLY'S KITCHEN</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACT II O'CAHAN'S DINING ROOM</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Play produced by Mick Waddell</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Committee desire to thank all those who assisted them in this their first production</p>
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PROGRAMME

30.

COLMCILL "GIVE HIM A HOUSE"

BY GEO

Cast
 (in order of appearance)

Patrick Hooley (a local revolutionary) ...	Jim Southwell
Dorothy (his wife) ...	Louie Sloan
Josephine (their daughter) ...	Mary Mathers
Father Hope (Parish Priest) ...	Oliver Keenan
Danny (a lorry driver) ...	Kevin Gallagher
Kandy (a solicitor) ...	James Cullamra
Sam Wilson (a labourer) ...	Jenny Livelie
Margrady (a merchant) ...	Barney Morgan
Archy (a farm hand) ...	Mickey Waddell
Gerty (Kate's daughter) ...	Imelda Murray
Kate (Hooley's sister) ...	Josh Murray
Mrs. Hooley (the grandmother) ...	Molly Gillen
Henry McManus ...	Paddy Crislan

Colmcille Players
 Present
**"Give Him a
 House"**
 by George Skiale

★
 Town Hall, Newry
 Sunday, 10th February
 ★

Programme 34.



"BORDER WINE."
 A Comedy in Three Acts
 by
G. SHIELDS
 Presented by
 St. Patrick's Dramatic Society,
 Poyntzpass
 1955

PEOPLE IN THE PLAY

Patrick Feeny, a farmer	James McHale
Kate Feeny, his wife	Mrs. McKee
Denis " " their sons	F. McSherry
Dan " " their sons	Fai Canavan
Julia " " their daughters	Rose Garvey
Cassie " " their daughters	Mary Murphy
Curate	Seumas McKee
Oiney (Mrs. Feeny's Brother)	Mick Cavanagh
Sam Firkin	Terry Murray
Nancy Firkin, his wife	Mary Waddell
Tony Lemon	Tom Canavan
Mr. Nailor (City Merchant)	Francis McCourt
Jane (a maid in Feeny's house)	Nan Canavan



The Jerretzpass Dramatic Society
 Present:
"HOME IS THE HERO."
 A Play by Walter Macken
 Season: 1955-56

★

This Play to the Abbey Theat
"That Old Lady,"
 Who, despite friends and comrades, refuses

THE PLAYERS

Paddo O'Reilly	Mick McNulty
Dayha, his wife	Maureen Brooks
Willie, his son	Hugh Magee
Josie, his daughter	Maura Burns
Dovefall, the tenant	M. J. Waddell
Bid, his wife	Mary Waddell
Mrs. Green	Joan Irwin
Lily Green, her daughter	Kathleen Brooks
Trapper O'Flynn	P. J. O'Hare
Manchester Monaghan	Patrick Byrne

The General Downstairs Living-room in the home
 of the O'Reilly's

THE TIME—
 THE PRESENT
 LATE AFTERNOON

Cast:

Frank Beyson (A Farmer)	Frank McSherry
John Dryson (His Neighbor)	G. Davis
Mrs. Black (His Servant)	Mary Waddell
Robert Hepburn (A Neighbor)	James McHale
Mrs. Hepburn (His Wife)	Nan Canavan
Baron Wylie (An Old Friend)	Maureen Devlin
Margaret Wylie (Her Niece)	Mary Murphy
Rev. James Marsh (A Protestant Minister)	Terry Murray
Mrs. Marsh (His Wife)	Angela Trainor
Mr. Appleton (A Bank Merchant)	Pat Canavan
Rose Entwistle (An American)	Sadhira McVeigh

The Play Produced by **MICK WADDELL**
 Stage Manager—**SEUMAS MCKEE**

Play Staff:
**FRANK MURPHY, JOHN TRAINOR, DOMENIC AND
 BRENDAN TRAINOR**

POYNTZPASS DRAMATIC SOCIETY

"THE FARMER WANTS A WIFE"

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS
 by
MARY J. WADDELL

Season 1958-59

34

