

Canon John McGettigan



John McGettigan was born in 1901 in Downings, County Donegal, Ireland. He was educated at St Eunan's College Letterkenny and at the Irish College in Paris. He was ordained for the Raphoe Diocese on the 3rd June 1928 at the Irish College in Paris by Bishop O'Brien of Kerry.

Directly from Paris in 1928 Fr McGettigan was sent on loan from the Raphoe Diocese to the Diocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh in Scotland where he was to serve for 10 years before returning to Ireland. His first posting in Scotland was to serve at St Patrick's Edinburgh where he was assistant Priest from 1928 to 1929 before being transferred here to St Patrick's Kilsyth again as an assistant Priest to PP Patrick Canon Macnamara, where he was to serve for a period of 9 years between 1929 and 1938.

We recall from the 'Centenary: Parish of St Patrick's Kilsyth 1865 – 1965' pp 27-28 written by James Docherty, "*Fr. McGettigan, a powerful big man, who for many years almost carried the parish on his own broad shoulders... He was indefatigable in visiting the sick – a duty to which he was completely dedicated – but was equally at home with the young in whose education he was immensely interested. Over the long years spent in Kilsyth he got to know much about people's affairs, often to their advantage. A man of tremendous energy and enthusiasm, he was generous to a fault; his one weakness perhaps being his interest in a certain football team from the east end of Glasgow.*"

Fr. McGettigan was bilingual his native language being Irish Gaelic and he was passionately interested in all things Gaelic. He was never to miss the opportunity to speak in Irish when encountering first generation Irish immigrants to Scotland, of which there were many in the Parish and the surrounding villages at this time. The influx of Irish economic migrants during his period in Scotland was to have a profound effect on his ministry in later years when he was to return to Ireland where he worked to increase local industry and employment to stem the devastating loss to local communities that emigration from Ireland was having amongst the population as the unemployed the poor and the youth were leaving home.

Fr. McGettigan's stay in Scotland may have been longer however events surrounding the Irish migrations to Scotland were to result in his recall to Raphoe. Whilst resident at St Patrick's Kilsyth, Fr McGettigan was directed by the Irish Hierarchy to investigate the plight of Irish potato workers following the Kirkintilloch (Achill) disaster of September 1937 where 10 potato workers were trapped and killed in a fire. After a period of 5 weeks investigation he travelled to Ireland to present his findings, after which his loan period to Scotland was ended and his ministry was to continue solely in Ireland thereafter. Fr McGettigan was to become a frequent holiday visitor to the Parish in subsequent years returning several times but most notably for the opening of the new St Patrick's Church in Kilsyth on St Patrick's Day 1965.



Fr. McGettigan's final visit to Kilsyth on St Patrick's Day, 17th March 1965 for the opening of the new church and the subsequent function in St Patrick's school with many local and national dignitaries.

After leaving Scotland, Fr McGettigan was appointed as assistant Priest pro tem at Kilcar in County Donegal for most of the rest of 1938. Before the end of the year however he was transferred to Dunfanaghy, County Donegal for a year between 1938 and 1939 and from there to Tory Island 1939 – 1940. Gweedore, County Donegal was to see Fr McGettigan appointed as assistant Priest for the next 23 years between 1940 and 1963. He was then appointed as Parish Priest at Carrick, County Donegal between 1963 and 1967 before returning as Parish Priest to Gweedore for a further 10 years from 1967 to 1977.

Fr McGettigan was made a Canon of the Raphoe Cathedral Chapter in 1971. Canon McGettigan died on 9th Jan 1977 at Derrybeg, County Donegal. His remains were interred at St Colmcille's graveyard Cnoc Fola, County Donegal where he had served as a young curate.

The first two of four articles quoted below were published in the Kilsyth Chronicle on Friday May 13th, 1938. A further two articles in respect of Fr McGettigan were published in Ireland and were local front page news upon his death, recalling his life and the impact he had made in

the communities in which he had served in Ireland. The first is from the Donegal Democrat 14th Jan 1977 p1, the second is from the Derry People and Donegal News 15th Jan 1977 p1.

“Former Kilsyth Priest Honoured

Father John McGettigan who left Kilsyth a short time ago, after being assistant to the Very Rev. Canon Macnamara for over eight years, was honoured on Sunday evening by his old parishioners on coming on a visit from Kilcar, Co. Donegal, Eire. St Patrick’s Hall held a crowded company.

Rev Father Harold, who presided, explained that that great honour had been conferred upon him owing to the inability of the Very Rev Canon Macnamara to attend. The Canon had been indisposed for the last few days. He was glad to see such a turnout. Had they taken any other hall in the town they would have packed it. They recognised they disappointed some who would like to have been present. They were met to honour a great priest in the person of Father McGettigan. (Applause, which was renewed and continued for some time.) Donegal had sent many sons to other lands to carry the Cross, but he ventured to say that there was none more enthusiastic, no more zealous, and no greater priest has ever left it’s shores than the priest they were honouring that night. (Applause.) The name McGettigan was borne by many a distinguished churchman. The name had been borne by the Primate of Ireland, while in their own diocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh they had a worthy McGettigan, second to the Archbishop. He ventured to say that if Father McGettigan had ventured to stay long in Scotland, perhaps his name would have been as famous as Monsignor in Edinburgh or the Archbishop of Omagh. (Applause.) Canon Macnamara appreciated his work here during the past 8½ years here very, very much and the people by their attendance and their subscriptions to the presentation showed that they appreciated his work as much. Father McGettigan was alone here with the Canon. It was rather a big job for an elderly man with over 2000 souls to look after. He ventured to say that no-one very did the work more loyally than Father McGettigan. He was a friend of the poor as no predecessor ever was. The finest trait in the priest’s life was his friendship of the poor and when he went out of his way to assist them. Canon Macnamara said he never could forget the assistance Father McGettigan gave him particularly during his serious illness. Very few knew the sacrifice Father McGettigan made at that time. Deep down in the Canon’s heart there was appreciation for Father McGettigan, whom he said, was the most loyal man he ever knew. (Applause.) It was absolutely true. He always had a kind word for everyone. (Applause.)

Mr James Docherty said he felt deeply honoured to be asked to present an illuminated address in book form, which he read as follows: -

‘Dear Father McGettigan, on behalf of the congregation of St. Patrick’s, Kilsyth and of your many other friends in Alba we extend to you ‘Cead mile failte’ [a hundred thousand welcomes] on your return amongst us this night. We are indeed pleased to see you again and trust that you may long be soared to carry out the work of the Church which you did so efficiently in Scotland. And it is therefore with the greatest pleasure that we take this opportunity of showing our deep gratitude and appreciation of your invaluable services during your eight and half years as our ‘Soggarth Aroon’ [a ‘dear priest’ in a poem by John Banim 1798 - 1842].

We recognised that you were likely to be recalled to your native Diocese of Raphoe at any time, but the longer this call was delayed, the more this congregation became endeared and attached to you. During your ministry in Kilsyth you worked zealously for all under your care

and the many organisations in the Parish had your goodwill and support. We deeply appreciate your attention to the sick and the poor whom you so often consoled by your administrations, your frequent visits and your kindly words; your devoted attention and investigations on behalf of claimants for Old Age Pensions and other benefits were constant and varied and many of our old men and women will recall with gratitude your kindly help. You especially interested yourself in the work of the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart and the large numbers approaching communion weekly is in no small measure due to your energy and enthusiasm for the spiritual welfare of the congregation.

Attention to those who have showed weaknesses and encouragement to those who have fallen by the way, were duties assiduously carried out by you, and many people in this Parish have reason to be grateful to you for the special interest you took in them and for being the means for the reconciliation to the practices of our Holy Mother Church. We are also grateful to you for the absorbing and sustained interest you took in the education of our boys and girls. You were unremitting in your attention paid to the children attending St. Patrick's school and in a manner known to us all, your counsel advice and assistance to our pupils attending St Ninian's High School, St Moden's Secondary School, the Training Colleges, the University and the other educational institutions to which they had graduated, was of lasting benefit and much appreciated.

Dear Rev Father, to describe in detail your numerous works for the cause of our holy religion and your many sacrifices on our behalf whilst in our midst, is not in our power. Suffice it to say that your genial disposition, your heartfelt sympathy and kindness in all cases of sickness, hardship and trouble, your great devotion to all the duties, sacred and secular in your calling and the diligent, enthusiastic and energetic manner in which you carried them out, deservedly won for you the esteem of all the members of this congregation and enshrined you for all time in the hearts of the people of St Patrick's Parish.

In asking you to accept this address we also desire to express our heartfelt thanks for all you have done for us and we wish to avail ourselves of this opportunity to present you with this cheque as a small token of our love esteem and gratitude. You carry away with you the love and affection of our heart; we shall remember you in our prayers to the Most High that He may prolong your useful life for many years and the He may bestow on you His choicest graces to enable you to carry on the work of your sacred calling.

We ask but one favour, that you will remember us in the Holy sacrifice of the Mass and with this request we now say to you "beannacht leat" [blessings be with you].'

The address was signed by Canon Macnamara, Rev. James Harold, Wm. McElhaney J.P. Robert Meechan, M.A. and James Docherty. Mr. William McElhaney, in making the presentation of a cheque to Father McGettigan, said that he was pleased to state that it, and the address incorporated to a certain extent not only the love, respect and esteem, but especially the heartfelt good wishes of the congregation of St. Patrick's and friends for his future welfare and success. They would have been [text lost off the bottom of the page] ...had just been commensurate with the wishes of the address, because then assuredly, Father McGettigan would be quite all right financially for the future. They sincerely hoped that the address would remind Father McGettigan for many years of his happy days here and the great amount of good that he had done for the Parish of Kilsyth.

The cheque was handed to Father McGettigan with the assurance that it was the heartfelt sentiment and the dearest wish of each and all of them that he would be blessed with good health and happiness, success and prosperity for many years. A set of Breviaries was presented to Father McGettigan on behalf of the women's guild by the president Mrs P.Healy, Mr.McElhaney stating that they returned their grateful thanks for his devoted care and attention in all cases of sickness, distress and sorrow and his kind words of comfort and consolation at this times. They respectfully begged him to remember them in his prayers; they would never forget him.

Provost Watson, who was given an especially hearty welcome along with his wife, said that looking round the hall brought back many old memories. He recalled appreciatively the R.C. clergy who had laboured here for the past fifty years. St Patrick's had always been very fortunate in its priests. He wished on behalf of the people of Kilsyth, Father McGettigan Godspeed in his new sphere. (Applause.)

Highly appreciative remarks were made by Fathers Murray, Whifflet (formerly Croy); O'Brien, Croy; Littlejohn, Glasgow; and Kerr, Kilsyth.

Father McGettigan who was honoured by the platform party by getting to their feet when he rose to reply, said that in the past it did not cause him much trouble to stand up before a Kilsyth audience, but that night he appeared with very mixed feelings. He felt that he would never be able to express in speech the gratitude he felt in his heart. Nine years ago, almost that night he got a letter to come to Kilsyth to take the place for a few weeks of Father Maxwell, who was off ill. Here he spent the nine happiest and best nine years of his life. He was perfectly happy. Many things contributed to it. In the first place he was very happy in the Chapel House. It was a home from home. The Housekeepers did everything possible to make his life as happy as could be. He was surrounded by very good friends in the priesthood and a host of lay friends too numerous to mention. Another thing that made him happy was that he found Kilsyth a loyal devoted and true people. He knew that he was following three of the most zealous priests who ever left Ireland. He realised his shortcomings; but with the assistance of the people he could say with a certain amount of complacency that he did well. (Applause.) He did well not because of himself but because of the loyalty and devotion of the people of Kilsyth to him. That was why his work was successful. The priest who would not be happy with the Kilsyth Congregation would not be happy anywhere else in the world. Outside his congregation he had many good friends. He would pay the people of Kilsyth, especially the non-Catholic, the tribute that they had always been most considerate to him. In his almost 9 years here he did not get even get an unkind look from anyone outside his own congregation. This night had been most embarrassing for him; for listening to the addresses he did not recognise himself. There was one to whom he owed a great debt of gratitude and thanks. That was Canon Macnamara. (Applause.) The Canon was to him not a boss but the greatest friend. He would always remember him and look up to him for his great personality, his amiability, that urbanity of manner, and that loving priestly character which made a deep impression upon him. He wished he could only repay the Canon. Unfortunately, there has been sad days in Kilsyth since he left. [The Dumbreck pit Disaster, Jan 1938, 4 months previously.] The relatives of those deceased had his greatest sympathy. Looking back over his time in Kilsyth, there had been one great change. Since the housing scheme began the face of Kilsyth had completely changed and if there was one man to whom that change was due, he was with them that night in the person of ex-Provost Jarvie (Applause) – a personal friend of his own, a man who had done him many kindly acts and shown him many kindnesses. He thanked him and all

the people for their loyalty and devotion. He thanked them for how they helped him when things were difficult, cheered him when he was depressed and took the words of warning he gave them. Never once did he say a word of praise for the people of Kilsyth; but deep down in his heart he felt grateful to them. In Banknock he had very dear friends. Throughout the Parish everyone was his friend and he was their friend. He felt that he had left no enemies behind him. (Applause.) One thing he felt was that he had carried out his duties to the sick to the best of his ability. He visited Glasgow Royal Infirmary twice a week and did local visits as well. Looking back, he would say that some of his happiest hours were spent at the sick bed. He thanked one and all for the presentation of this nice address and for the cheque. The contents of the cheque would soon pass away, but the memory of those that inspired it would not. May God bless them always. (Applause.)

Mr. Barry, Kirkintilloch [where he had worked on the Achill Disaster before leaving St Patrick's for Raphoe], as a layman, spoke very appreciatively of Father McGettigan for his sincerity, his honesty of purpose, and modesty.

An excellent entertainment programme was sustained by Miss McGuckie, Kilsyth; Miss McAulay, dancer, Renton; Master James McAllister, soloist, Glasgow; Mr. Jerome Donegan, tenor, Glasgow. Mr. George Rodden, M.A. LRAM, Kirkintilloch was a capable accompanist."

Kilsyth Chronicle Friday 13th May, 1938.

"Kilsyth St Patrick's School Honour Father McGettigan

On Monday afternoon Father McGettigan who left Kilsyth for Kilcar, Co. Donegal was presented with a handsome canteen of cutlery and a silver tea service – gifts from the staff and pupils of St. Patrick's School. The children were assembled in St Patrick's Hall and as Father McGettigan, accompanied by Father Harold and Father Kerr appeared on the platform, they were given a thunderous welcome.

After a short musical program, Miss Keane, on behalf of the staff and pupils, made the presentation. Miss Keane said it was her privilege on behalf of the staff to welcome you back to Kilsyth. You have been missed by one and all and you can see for yourself in the glad faces of the children their joy at having you here. For nearly nine years you laboured amongst us and during that time many a weary sad heart you helped to cheer, many a heavy burden you helped lighten by your wonderful kindness and charity. The children love you and with good reason. They know in their own way of the deep and unfailing interest you always took in their welfare. I well remember when you first came to this parish. Someone said, 'The new Priest appointed to Kilsyth is a great Educationalist and he is particularly interested in school children.' We soon found out that out! You were here but a few weeks when you knew all of the school children, even by name. Of course, none more appreciated your regard for the spiritual and social wellbeing of the children than the teachers. In any doubts or difficulties, you were to be relied upon. And the success of the children in their examinations – the Day School Certificate, the Control and the Quality was ever your concern. On behalf of the staff and the pupils I would ask you to accept these gifts, not by their value but as a token of our undying gratitude and esteem. We wish you length of years and happiness to continue the good work of your sacred calling amongst the people of your own beloved Eire.

In the course of his reply, Father McGettigan complimented the children and in a happy manner paid a graceful tribute to the staff for their efficiency and loyal devotion to duty, and

referred to Miss McNally (whose absence he regretted- she, having recently retired) as having done Trojan work during her forty odd years of faithful service at St Patrick's School."

Kilsyth Chronicle Friday 13th May 1938.

"Eminent Churchman and Gael.

Canon McGettigan, a native of Downings, was a man of great Priestly zeal and was imbued with a love of everything Gaelic. He had been Parish Priest of the extensive Gaeltacht parish of Gweedore for 10 years during which he earned the affection and respect of the people amongst whom he felt particularly at home as he was himself a native speaker and Gaelic scholar. Language was never a barrier between him and his flock who recognised in him one who was a zealous worker in their interests, both spiritually and temporally.

Precept and Example

Indeed he played no little role in the development of the present prosperity that is a feature of Gweedore as he took a great interest in every facet of life there and by precept and example always strove to lead his people to a better life. Always conscious of the need for local employment to halt the drain of emigration that had for so long been the bane of life in Gweedore, he got particular satisfaction at seeing the industrial development there in recent years which has seen the employment of 600 native speaking Irish workers.

Native Culture

The native culture was of particular interest to him and he always used Irish where possible whether in the pulpit or in ordinary social events as well as in the day to day conversation he had. He took a deep interest in the summer Irish College movement in the parish and in his native Ros Goill, and in the activities of the Gweedore Gaelic Theatre. Gaelic Games too drew his earnest support and he was for many years prominent in the Gaelic Athletic Association serving as President for a period. Canon McGettigan was a zealous worker in the sphere of pastoral care. He was at the disposal of his people when help or advice was needed, and he was held by them in the highest regard and affection. He has a special concern for the welfare of children and did great work for the promotion of education at all levels. The setting up of vocational schools and the secondary school at Gweedore had his strong support."

Donegal Democrat, 14th Jan 1977 p1.

And from the 'Derry People and Donegal News.

"Throughout his life he was a tremendous language enthusiast and was very much to the fore in the promotion of the famous Gweedore Irish College, of which he was President and indeed it's real driving force that raised it to its very high standard. His most outstanding work was in Gweedore where he came to be so well known and loved by the local people. For the past ten years he has acted as Parish Priest and it was in his term that the lovely new St Mary's Church was built.

He was always devoted to the people whom he served and through his priestly life found a close connection with the people of Gweedore. As curate he came to know and understand their problems and was a key figure in the advancement of the lot of the people. He worked zealously for them in circumstances that were vastly different from those of today and his outstanding leadership served as a great example and encouragement to so many people of the parish to various undertakings that unusually turned out successfully. He was a man of

genuine interest in the people and promoted the cause of his district with great eloquence and fervour in the Government Departments and with other authorities.

He was a figure respected by all people of all ages and interests in Gweedore, forthright and sincere. His deep feeling for the people and his anxiety to improve their lot had made him personally well known to the people in this Gaeltacht district that today thrives so well, but also to their people in Glasgow, New York and other parts of the globe.

There was scarcely a worthwhile project undertaken in Gweedore over a long number of years with which he was not connected. His advice was sought and generously given, and his assistance was readily forthcoming. He was a kindly man of great generosity who gave liberally of time and effort to his people. He took particular satisfaction in the establishment of the Gaelic Theatre in Gweedore and had a special pride in the fame and the achievements of Aisteoiri Ghaoth Dobhair.

Scourged by generations by emigration he always managed to keep a close contact with the scattered people of his Parish. It was there for a very special pleasure for him when the remarkable Industrial Estate Project in Gweedore got underway and, as he had done in many other ventures, he gave it his full support. This he saw as the first real opportunity to turn the huge emigration tide that had broken up local families as their children entered their teens. With his own personal labour and his close contact with so many families, his deep regard for the people, his unhesitating endeavours for their welfare, Fr McGettigan won for himself a very special place in the hearts of the people of Gweedore.

His years as a curate at Cnoc Fola were showed particularly his close concern for the people among whom he served. He realised their needs, never spared himself in their pursuit and won their full confidence and co-operation. Voluntary workers helped provide for the first time a cemetery close to the Church of St Colmcille – and it was there that the remains of this outstanding churchman, a lifetime worker for his people, were laid to rest.”

Derry People and Donegal News Jan 15th, 1977 p1.



Fr McGettigan on St Patrick's Day 1965 in Kilsyth at the dinner function for the opening of the new St Patrick's Church held in St Patrick's School.