

Writer Dylan Lyons speaks to Padraic Slater, who is now based in Vancouver, Canada.

Episode Description: *This episode reflects on the complexities of emigration, as Paddy shares candid insights into nearly five decades abroad, guided by Dylan's thoughtful and empathetic questioning.*

His memories of Clonmel offer a glimpse of a changing Ireland, while reflections on identity and belonging give the conversation wider resonance. The episode concludes with a moving reading of his original poem, drawing on Irish mythology, nature and history.

The Clonmel Exchanges Podcast Project is a partnership project with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

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Hello and welcome to *Loving and Leaving Clonmel*. In this series, we share the stories of Clonmel natives who have moved away and are now living all over the world. We'll hear about their roots, what they miss most, and what life is like for them now.

In this episode, writer Dylan Lyons speaks to Padraic Slater, who is now based in Vancouver, Canada.

Dylan: Ireland has a long history of immigration. For different reasons, at different times, people have left to build a life somewhere else. And everyone who has done so has their own story. This is Paddy Slater's.

Padraic: I was born in '55 and grew up in the '50s and '60s and moved away in '72, essentially to university. So we'll say from '55 to '72 I was a Clonmel native, and then the church was very dominant. The economy was very stagnant and poor. Jobs weren't scarce, which is the main reason why I came abroad.

And Clonmel itself is very much a small town, like a large village. Everybody virtually knew everybody else. It's hard for me to imagine, for younger people maybe to imagine, that Ireland in those days was nearly the same, in many ways, as it was, I suspect, in the '30s and '40s, because we hadn't progressed economically. We hadn't progressed socially, I think, in the sense that we hadn't stood up on our feet as a nation quite yet.

And yet now, in the '80s, '90s and beyond into this century, the strides made in Ireland are so different and so fantastic.

Nevertheless, it was a wonderful place to grow up. I specifically grew up in the first 13 or 14 years up in Griffith Avenue, which was a new housing estate at that time. My family moved in after they had me, the third baby, so they needed a bit more space. So, up we go to Griffith Avenue.

And I mean, right behind our back garden there was a field called Jock Carroll's, which then led to the Wilderness, the rail tracks in the Wilderness. So all you had to do was climb over the back fence of our garden and you were kind of in the countryside already, right? So that was wonderful.

I've always been somebody who loved nature and access to nature, so that was great. And then sports. I love sports.

We played on the streets. Used to get chased off the streets by a guard wheeling on his bicycle. And then my dad said, to hell — to heck — with that. We can't be having you chased away playing football on the streets. Let's do something about it.

So he mobilised the local teenagers into a club called the GAYC — G-A-Y-C, Griffith Avenue Youth Club — which is kind of a funny name now when you look back on it. And we got permission from the local corporation to level a field that was behind all the houses into a playing field.

That was a lovely memory, because you can imagine the athletic excellence and the camaraderie and the team spirit that was there in those days.

Dylan: When you think of your time living in Clonmel, are there any places that stand out to you or areas that hold special memories?

Padraic: Certainly the Wilderness, because it was so close. And I was a fairly studious type, so I spent a lot of time over the books, right? But I also had another streak of me that wanted to be out and about, like any young lad.

And so we'd get out to the Wilderness, out along the tracks, and you're no more than, I don't know, maybe a kilometre or two out beyond Clonmel and already you're in the wild beyond in

some ways, you know? So we played all kinds of games and gangs and cowboys and Indians and just escapism. And so that was one fond area for me.

Another area, because I joined the Boy Scouts fairly young. You were supposed to be 11, I think, to join Boy Scouts at that point in time. And I never did join the Cubs or anything, but I joined the Boy Scouts at around 10 and immediately got to love hiking.

My favourite hike was up to the Cross and Glenary, and then through the woods into Cannon Wood and Carey's Castle and back home by the Dungarvan Road. That then introduced me to the countryside around.

So I would have to say that Clonmel, while it's had its ups and downs from an economic development point of view, from a picturesque, beautiful valley scenery point of view, it's still an absolutely idyllic place.

And I just — you may not have the same appreciation as a young lad as one has now, but it still clicks with you, I suppose, in many ways.

While I loved activity and sports and that, I also liked quiet places and getting away from it. And some of the places, like the places I used to hike and St Patrick's Well, would be more of the quiet, introspective kind of places.

Dylan: You said that you've grown, I suppose, to appreciate the landscape there — the wells, the rivers, things like that. Do you think leaving Clonmel had that effect?

Padraic: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I think absence, as you know, makes the heart grow fonder.

I'd have to say that now I miss landscape. Even though the Vancouver landscape is beautiful because of its greenery, its shrubbery, its mountains, its softness and so on, at the same time it's not the soft Irish landscape.

So when I come back and I fly in over Dublin Airport, or occasionally over Cork, the first thing that connects with me is just the soft green rolling landscape.

And as somebody who likes hiking, I've always preferred hiking rolling hills to hiking rocky mountains. Now, the Rocky Mountains are fantastic, but it's a different kind of experience.

Dylan: Even nowadays, it's very hard still for people to say, "I'm going to uproot and go to Australia or America." But back then, what was it like to actually say, "Okay, I'm going to do this"?

Padraic: It was very scary and very sad, to be perfectly honest.

I was going to — we had an old atlas that belonged to my grandfather, and it was — why I mention it because it was probably about 50 years dated — and I looked up Canada. I looked up Calgary, and Calgary had this tiny, tiny little circle beside it, made it look like a village, you know, in West Clare or something.

So you're wondering, where is this place that's about 5,000 miles away, and what am I going to? But of course, I had been there already and I had started to begin to know what it was like.

But it was very sad leaving family and leaving friends. I'll be honest, I didn't initially leave because I absolutely wanted — couldn't wait — to get out of there. No way.

You know, I left because I felt like I needed to leave initially to get some opportunity, and thinking I might be only going for two or three or four years.

It was very sad, very much of a break. But also, it was also a big risk. No question it was a big risk.

And even though I said earlier that it was easier to find jobs in Calgary, and it was ultimately, initially, you go over there with barely \$1,000 in your pocket. That might last you in those days maybe two months. So you take anything you can get, and we did.

You know, so I worked at many things that had nothing to do with my education for the earliest weeks and months and even a year before I settled into something that was more pleasing.

Dylan: How were you able to strike that balance between feeling as though the better opportunities were in leaving, but also wanting to stay connected?

Padraic Slater: That's a great question.

I suppose, to go first to the reason why I did move and how I moved. I had a friend from college whose family had moved to Canada, and I'd stayed in touch with him, and we played soccer together in college.

And he kept encouraging me, even when I was over in Belgium, to consider coming over to Canada. And I kept waiting because I wasn't quite ready to. Already being in Belgium, I was missing Ireland already for the first year I was away.

So I went back to Ireland first to find that it wasn't quite what I hoped it would be, and then moved away.

But what I'm trying to say is that not only was there an economic pull of better opportunity, but there was also a personal factor, in that I already had a fairly easy, ready-made connection in Calgary.

And I had visited Canada as a student a couple of times to work during the summer, make some money, and I visited my friend in Calgary.

So as soon as I landed in Calgary in 1978, it was far easier than I might have thought, for a couple of reasons.

One is there were more Irish, even in small, remote Calgary — which it was at the time — than you might have imagined. You know, it's not like New York or Boston, or the established cities with huge Irish populations.

So, but eventually we realised the strength in numbers, and so we organised into the Calgary Irish Cultural Society, which has become one of the strongest Irish cultural societies in Canada.

So part of the creation of a cultural society there by us was an absolute expression of our own needs. You know, if you can't find your needs met externally, you go and meet them yourself. You create something.

Dylan: Paddy's observation about the need for a cultural society as a means of staying connected really stood out to me. It highlighted that just because you move abroad, it doesn't mean you turn your back on where you came from. And I was eager to find out more about what exactly the cultural society meant to him.

Padraic: What it means to me is just the ability, at a whim, to rediscover your Irishness anytime you want.

It's not like you go there every day or even every week, but knowing that there's a music session or a pub or a sports gathering, or just a bit of craic with the lads who understand the same sense of humour as you, might even speak a bit of Irish with you.

All of those things being available at the drop of a hat. That availability made it so much easier to settle in abroad.

Because, you know, when I first arrived in Canada, just to get a phone call through to Clonmel was a huge challenge. Huge challenge, which would be very strange for a young lad like yourself to imagine.

And even letters would take probably three weeks to get there. They still take a long time to get there. So you're always conscious that if I say something right now in a letter, maybe it won't be relevant three weeks' time. I won't be feeling that way in three weeks' time.

So being able to create something Irish then, I think, was even more important than now, because now we can get on YouTube, we can get on Facebook or WhatsApp or sports applications, and we can see sports entertainment and chat with our friends via video calls. We can do it all instantaneously.

That was not the case in the first, say, 15 or 20 years I was in Canada.

Dylan: Would I be right in saying then that you were in Canada for a while before you decided, I suppose, "Okay, I'm going to stay. I'm not going to go back"?

Padraic: Yeah. And I'm not sure that there's any definitive moment, at least not in my case, where I decided, "This is it. I'm never going back."

I mean, even to this day, on a very rare occasion, I'll get this real estate listing from the *Irish Times* on a glorious property in County Tipperary or Waterford or wherever it is, and you look and you think, "Oh, yeah, wouldn't that be nice?" But then you think realistically, you know, what are you thinking about?

So there's never been a definitive period. And I still, to this day, would never say that I would never settle back in Ireland again.

But by the same token, I know that if I were to head back to Ireland and find a place to settle there, I would immediately naturally miss a tremendous amount of what life here in Canada means.

You know, it's just the nature of the beast.

So I don't know that an emigrant is ever absolutely and totally utterly settled, in my opinion.

You know, now I've had friends who've gone back to Ireland twice, cost them \$20,000, \$30,000 to make the move, and ended up back here, you know, which I certainly wouldn't want to put myself or those dear to me through that.

Although I'm sure they did it for their own good reasons, but I think it does speak to the notion that it's a bit like coming away and putting a piece of yourself in a deep freeze.

And every so often, let's say St. Patrick's Day comes around, or you go to a particularly good Irish concert, or you're having a really good, deep-felt chat with a friend, some part of that comes alive in you again.

But then it goes away and you put it back in the deep freeze.

So whether people see that as sad or not, I could care less. It's just reality, and I think that's to me the sort of quintessential emigrant experience, and I'm very comfortable with it because it makes you who you are.

Dylan: You mentioned there you had started to think of Canada as home. I suppose the question then that brought to mind for me is: what does home mean to you now after so many years?

Padraic: Funny you should say that, because I was having that chat with my sweetheart this morning, who's born and bred in Vancouver, right? And Joy is her name.

And we've had this conversation before, but over time, home for me has evolved to mean more a state of mind than a place.

Now, there's no question that where you're from, where you were brought up, always stays with you. The famous phrase, "you can take the man out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the man." I'm definitely a classic example of that.

But for me now, home is where I feel most at ease. And that can be anywhere. It doesn't have to be Vancouver. It doesn't have to be Canada.

I think home is very much a state of mind. And it's a place where you're at ease with yourself and at ease with the surroundings.

Dylan: Paddy spoke earlier about his time in the Boy Scouts, his love for hiking and for nature. And as our conversation progressed, it became clear to me that Paddy's love for Clonmel and indeed for Ireland could be found not just in the Irish landscape, but in our history.

In Paddy's words, the Irish attachment to place is an attachment to history.

Paddy captured this feeling of a love for nature, of growing up in Clonmel, and of a love and appreciation for our history in his poem, *An Up and Down Hike*.

Paddy:

We start out from the Gashouse Bridge
Four poets in our party
With strides of boy scouts and girl guide
All looking hale and hearty.

Through Denis Burke Park we stroll
Methinks I hear a stir -
Four noble swans in plaintive voice
The Four Children of Lir

Have they flown from Sruth na Maoile
Or Loch Dairbhreach - we cannot tell
So perished do the creatures look
From Aoife's ancient spell

They sing us tales of climate change
That haunt us to this day
And warn us of a similar fate
If mankind fails to mend his way

And when St Mary's bells then toll
We think we hear old Mochaomhog
By now four poets quite possessed
Striding on towards Tir na nOg

We leave dear Lady Blessington's Weir
Old Moch's whispers on the wind
Take us back four thousand years
As Tuatha De Danann come to mind

When the tolling bells are done
Like swans are we, now flying free
Three men reborn, a woman too
We head off to Gleann a' Ri

The climb soon has us out of breath
Thank God for mountain air
Up the Long Hill's gentle slopes
No longer weighed by swans' despair

On we climb up Scrouthea Hill
By now our breathing hard
At the Holy Cross give thanks
For the blessings of our Lord

The sweet sight of Sliabh na mBan
With echoes of young Fionn Mac Cumhaill
Are all the blessings we require
Feel the ancient spirits rule!

Then down through Gleann a' Ri
Amid the purple heather bloom
Not a bother on us now
Far from TV's doom and gloom

But hark! There lies a Famine ruin
In this onetime verdant vale
How heavily history reigns
In the homeland of the Gael

What nettle-eating horrors then
Had plagued our precious land
To poorhouses and paupers' graves
The peasants all condemned

Harrowing voices haunt us now
What blight is this upon our land?
The Saxon taking all our grain
Banishing us to Van Diemen's land

"But hark a voice like thunder spake"
Again we cast off all despair
Our spirits rise for Eireann's sake
We give thanks in the mountain air

For our forefathers' courage and strength
They braved so much adversity
And carved for us the easier path
That led us to prosperity

So down the easy path we stray
Along to Carey's Castle ruins
Serenaded all the way
By babbling brook's soothing tunes

In the abbey's ruins we sit
And listen for Old Carey
The schoolmaster long since gone
A long, long way from Tipperary

Then what of bankrupt Colonel Greene?
We chat about his dharma

And pretty soon we all agree
His bankruptcy was his karma

Down the old Dun Garbhan Road
At last we wander full of grace
Through Irishtown and tall West Gate
To our favourite drinking place

The Main Guard clock is striking six
At that we take our cues
“Four of the usual, Sean” says I
And we drink to the Mountain Muse

Dylan: With immigration being as topical nowadays as it ever has been, do you have any message you'd like to pass on to maybe someone like myself who is not sure at times whether it is actually best to love and leave?

Padraic: Maybe just a kind of a hybrid idea, that on the one hand, I'm eternally grateful to Ireland, to Clonmel, to my teachers in the High School, to my parents, to my family, to everything that has shaped the person I became in the first 18 or 20 years that I lived there. I'm eternally grateful for that.

And the other aspect I wanted to add to that is that the exercise of emigration, while it has had its trials, tribulations and pain, I'd encourage people, without necessarily indulging in the act of emigration, to be risk-takers because it's probably the greatest risk I took in my life.

And in the end, it turned out to be the most influential positive thing I did, and taught me to not fear risk and to not fear change, and to be able to be adaptable and to settle in.

Emigration is a wonderful shaping experience. And I'm not saying every — in fact, I sometimes wish that we had fewer Irish emigrants because it would speak of a healthier country.

But the lesson of emigration is risk-taking, adaptation, change, tolerance, understanding, compassion.

Dylan: The ability to feel at home and in touch with your roots, at least for me, comes not just from connecting with people, but also from the objects and keepsakes we choose to bring with us on our travels. I was curious to see if Paddy felt the same.

Padraic: As I'm sitting here now, I look up on the wall of the bedroom office. There's a 1916 Proclamation. I just say that because it's the first thing that comes to mind.

If I turn to my right, I have a poster of ancient Ireland. If I turn another bit to the right, a poster of Ireland's writers, all over the wall.

A young Irish friend who came from Dublin — now he's living in New Zealand — when we became friends and he used to visit me often here, he said, "God, you've done a wonderful job of recreating mini-Ireland here."

So all over my house there are pictures, snippets of poetry, foods even, just all kinds of snippets of expression of my Irishness.

At the same time, there's also stuff I've accumulated in Canada and Belgium and places I've visited.

But without question, the images, some of the foods I eat, some of the books I read — books, I'd have to say books, because I do like reading.

Both poetry books and I'm just at the moment I'm reading a novel by — and I'm late in the day reading this — but a novel by Colm Tóibín called *Nora Webster*.

And there are just so many good writers in Ireland that a couple of friends of mine who are also into these books were constantly swapping wonderful, wonderful Irish authors, including, for example, Claire Keegan, who we just discovered in the last three or four years.

Dylan: So those would be some of the things. And a lot of the great Irish poets and Irish poetry — there is a real... you can almost feel the landscape. What has that meant when you can read and it almost brings you back?

Padraic: Okay. Actually, sometimes I have a hard time completing the effort of reading an Irish poem that really means a lot to me without breaking down, almost in tears, you know.

So, yeah, it goes so deep. You can even hear it in my voice right now.

And of course then, when you come across a wonderful poem like *The Planter's Daughter* by Austin Clarke, or anything by Yeats, or anything by Heaney, it's just amazing to me how they can evoke so much with so little.

And that's why I think I love poetry: it has the ability to evoke way more than it is in just a few turns of phrase.

Dylan: We've spoken a lot about attachments to Ireland — loving home, loving Clonmel, leaving and not necessarily wanting to leave, and trying to find connection, trying to tap into what it means to be Irish and to hold on to that heritage.

Now, having experienced emigrating and connecting to Ireland not as someone who lives in it but who longs, in a way, for it, do you feel more Irish having left Ireland than actually being in Ireland?

Padraic: I suppose my — the answer, the truthful answer to that is yes and no.

There's no question, as going back to my earlier answer and your earlier question about the longing growing with distance and time. So in that point of view, yes, my appreciation for everything about Ireland has grown over the years.

But, by the same token, I've also developed, I'm sure, after 48 years here, Canadian mannerisms and Canadian quirks and habits and friends and activities.

So I'd have to be honest with myself and everybody and say that I'm very much now an Irish-Canadian rather than, you know, purely Irish or purely anything.

But there's no question that that Irish part of me, that hyphenated part of me, will always be the first part and the part that I feel the strongest.

Dylan: And the hyphen, as you mentioned in Irish-Canadian, that's where it all is. It symbolises your past and your present and everything in between.

The hyphen is, in a way, everything.

Padraic: Yeah. Yeah. Indeed. Well put.

That was an episode of 'Loving and Leaving Clonmel'. A project by the Clonmel Junction Arts Festival in partnership with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

It was created by Artistic Director Rebecca Lenehan, with podcast consultant Siobhán McHugh and Tipperary Museum curator Marie McMahon.

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