



LIVES LIVED

THOMAS MCGREAL

Miner, labourer, union activist, balladeer. Born on Nov. 18, 1920, in Westport, County Mayo, Ireland; died of kidney failure in Toronto on Jan. 1, 1999, aged 78.

Now to conclude and finish as my pen is going to fail, I was born in lovely Ireland and my name it is McGreal."

When Tom McGreal was being carried as a baby for his christening, his father's ass and cart was held up by "Black and Tan" British auxiliary soldiers who had just shot a neighbour. The neighbour was running across a hilly dale to save a lamb as the Tans were passing on the road. Such were the times in Ireland.

Tom's schooling was cut short by the Depression; at 11 he was spending long days cutting turf (peat) with his brother, Paddy, in the shadow of the holy mountain of Croagh Patrick, overlooking Clew Bay. The turf was sold by his father for a few shillings and the rest burned in the fireplace in the one-room, thatched cottage where he lived with his parents, grandparents and seven brothers and sisters.

At 15, he left home to find work. He was among the original "McAlpine's fusiliers," gangs of Irish navvies or labourers who roamed Britain in the thirties and forties existing from job to job and sending money to their desperate families in Ireland. He made his way to Yorkshire where he became a coal miner. After the war, he courted and married Ellen Madden, the daughter of an Irish emigrant.

The three oldest children were born: Paul, Rory and Ann (now called Pat). Then, experts came, telling the men that the mines would be closing and they would do best to emigrate. My father sailed to Canada, arriving in Toronto in the spring of 1956. Because of his mining experience, he immediately landed work as a labourer on the new Bloor Street subway. There he joined with other workers from all over the world, who together transformed Hogtown into a metropolis.

It was at this time that the International Labourer's Union Local #83 was born. As vice-president, Tom worked hard to build a union that would encompass workers of all nationalities. When many Canadian and Irish members were adamant about excluding Ital-



Thomas McGreal in 1955.

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ians and other nationalities, Tom fought to open the union to all on an equal basis. The multinational character of Local 183 exists to this day. Tom equated racism, in any form, with ignorance.

Two more boys were born in the 1960s: Martin and Domnick. (When questioned about the aberrant spelling of Domnick, my father always said, "One 'i' is good enough.") They were Canadians and he wanted us to be Canadians too. I went with him and we became citizens together. Until the day he died, he would often say that this was the smartest move we ever made.

He knew how the world worked beyond Canada's borders and wanted no part of it. To him Canada stood for fairness, where he and his children could have an equal chance without the snobbery and social stratification that still exist in Europe. Tom later worked as a stores keeper at DeHavilland Aircraft in Downsview, Ont., and served as a union steward and committeeman in the UAW and CAW until his retirement.

Ellen McGreal died from cancer in 1980 and his youngest son died in an accident in 1995. Tom had the good fortune to meet and marry a lovely lady, Louise Russell, who loved him and looked after him until he died. People who know Tom remember him best as a balladeer. He had no equal when he stood up to give a stirring recitation of *Sam McGee, Dangerous Dan McGrew*, or *The Green-Eyed Yellow God*. In addition, he had a repertoire of ballads that he composed himself in the tradition of the West of Ireland.

Those days are over and done my friends, I'll never see them more.

Nor stroll again on a moonlit night 'round lovely Clew Bay's shore.

So I must say, 'goodbye forever.' My soul I must try and save,

For my body is doomed to rest in an exile's lonely grave.

But there's one request that I shall make on my last and final day,

That my soul will find its resting place 'round lovely sweet Clew Bay.

Rory McGreal

Rory McGreal lives in Fredericton.