

# The faithful Fathers McEnroe in and near Pennsylvania, 1800s-1950s<sup>1</sup>

*Rosemary Buffington*

The McEnroe families from the parishes of Lurgan and Castlerahan in County Cavan sent a remarkable number of their sons as priests to areas of eastern Pennsylvania and New York in the mid-1800s. In particular, five men were sent to the Catholic diocese of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. Although escaping difficult times in Ireland, they sailed into the turbulent vortex of the Industrial Revolution, Molly Maguires, temperance marches, cultural melting pots, and money.

Earlier generations of Irish immigrants had dug canals along the Lehigh River to transport coal from Pennsylvania's anthracite region to residential customers in Philadelphia and New York. Now, a new generation of immigrants was mining ever more coal, and laying railroad lines along the river to expedite movement of the coal to the newly belching iron and later steel mills near Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton, in eastern Pennsylvania.

## **Rev. Charles McEnroe, 1826-1859**

Only a brief worded sketch remains of Rev. Charles McEnroe, elder brother of Revs Michael and Philip. He was the son of Philip McEnroe and Catherine Farrelly from the townland of Island in the parish of Castlerahan in County Cavan. He studied in the Kilmore Academy in Cavan town from 1845 to 1848.<sup>2</sup> He emigrated to the United States, and following his ordination was assigned to the young St Mary's of the Immaculate Conception parish in the coal town of Mauch Chunk in 1856. Previous priests had lived short lives there due to virulent epidemics and financial stress.<sup>3</sup> (Saint John Neumann, bishop at the time, visited and moved into the rectory for a time to help). Father McEnroe did not last long either, but was able to pay off the small yet crushing debt and build a confessional. He died on 14 May 1859.<sup>4</sup>

## **Rev. Michael McEnroe 1834-1910**

Younger brother of Rev. Charles, and elder brother of Rev. Philip, Fr Michael was educated in Cavan and then St Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia. He was ordained in 1861 by Bishop James Wood.

When hundreds of Irish Catholic immigrants fled the potato famine

- 1 The author thanks Monsignor Liam Kelly for his kind assistance.
- 2 Francis J. MacKiernan & Raymond Dunne, *The college boys: students of the Kilmore Academy and Saint Patrick's College, Cavan 1839-2000* (Cavan, 2008), p. 15.
- 3 Immaculate Conception Church website, Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. [iccjimthorpe.org/history](http://iccjimthorpe.org/history).
- 4 *The Public Ledger*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 16 May 1859.

and settled near the Bethlehem Iron Company, Bishop Wood sent Michael McEnroe to tend the flock. In time he was able to form a parish, named Holy Infancy as a nod to the name of that town, Bethlehem, which was founded by Moravians on Christmas 1741. The Moravians generously donated the land for the new Catholic church. While many Irish counties were represented among the new parishioners, Cavan and Meath were weighted heavily, with scores of families from those counties. I have hoped to find historical communication about the early Irish between the Moravians in Bethlehem and Moravians in Cootehill, but as yet have found none.

In reality, the Irish settled on the opposite side of the river from tidy Bethlehem and the Moravians, in filthy tenements and shacks in the new industrial sprawl named South Bethlehem. In later years, people would joke that you needed a passport to cross from one side of the Lehigh River to the other. It was truly a valley of tears, as men laboured from dawn to dusk in the dangerous mill and surrounding mines for wages that did not support their families. Women and children wandered the railroad tracks scrounging for bits of coal, men died in gruesome mill accidents and disease spread easily from person to person down the dirty streets.

While today we remember Bethlehem for its structural steel of the late twentieth century, before that, a major use of its iron and steel was armaments. As early as the American Civil War in the 1860s, Irish-produced iron from Bethlehem was part of the Union war effort, and quite a few sons of Ireland in the Lehigh Valley volunteered for the Union Army. They appreciated the signup bonus, and hoped that someday America would repay the favour through aid to the Irish independence movement.

In 1866, Asa Packer, famous investor in railroads and iron, a protestant, was said to have donated two acres on a steep hillside to be used as Holy Infancy's cemetery.<sup>5</sup> This was hailed as a surprising act of American liberality at the time. Other reports document the purchase of the land by Fr Michael, and the cemetery was named St Michael's. Family plots were each delineated with stone, iron, wood, or cement markers and fences, with each family taking care of their own. People lived their entire lives in the few hundred yards separating the iron/steel mill and the cemetery.

5 *Wayne County Herald*, Honesdale, Pennsylvania, 26 July 1866.



*St Michael's Cemetery by the famous photographer Walker Evans, 1935.  
Credit: South Bethlehem Historical Society*

The living and working conditions of the Irish in Pennsylvania spawned groups to push for workers' rights and humane treatment. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, or AOH, was thought by many to be a legitimate organization that hid an illegitimate organisation, the Molly Maguires. Fr Michael seemed to have had his fill of both in July of 1876:

At first mass Sunday morning, in the Church of the Holy Infancy, South Bethlehem, the pastor, Rev. M. C. McEnroe, paid his compliments to the members of the South Bethlehem division, Ancient Order of Hibernians, or Molly Maguires. He said that recently one Sunday, some of the members of the order went to the furnace at Freemansburg, took whiskey with them, made drunk the workmen there, and then endeavored to induce them to join the accursed order. He named these men. The reverend gentleman reviewed the history of the order, and the same was not excessively flattering. He said the very constitution of the order was a fraud. It demanded that members must be Irishmen and Catholics, must commune once a year, and be honest, respectable citizens. Then, naming half a dozen of the men prominent in the order here, he asked, 'Who that has been here for the past ten years has seen so-and-so commune?'; He scarcely saw how they claimed to be Catholics. 'Are they honest and reputable? Go to the shops and stores throughout the borough and see.' Father McEnroe dwelt on the subject at length: gave the Mollies to understand that there could be no peace, no half-way measures, no compromise: that he meant to follow them, that all true Irishmen would support him, and that for one, he was not afraid of the dreaded 'Molly Maguires'. The denunciation was as vehement as it was unexpected, and it

has mollified the ‘Mollies’ considerably.<sup>6</sup>

In 1877, Fr Michael was transferred to St Mary’s parish in St Clair, a mining town, and Holy Infancy’s parishioners were so incensed that they threatened, but failed, to close the church.<sup>7</sup>

No sooner had he moved to St Clair than Fr Michael’s flock was beset with a tragedy in the local mine.<sup>8</sup> The scene of the explosion was nearly two miles from the entrance shaft, under a mountain and a valley. Two hundred men and boys were working, and suddenly there was a rumble as of thunder. Then the jet black pile was lit with an intense light that floated rapidly between the roof and the floor, and when it passed, there followed a sucking wind that lifted cars of coal and hurled them hundreds of feet. Father Michael buried the dead and consoled the living.

He was also present at the hanging of some of the more notorious Molly Maguires in June of 1877, urging them to ask pardon for their sins before facing the gallows.<sup>9</sup> The following year, he denounced the growing labor union the Knights of Labor, claiming they were communists.<sup>10</sup> It was clear that Fr Michael had a difficult task balancing employment with threats of violence.

Transferred again, Father Michael then started a new parish in Manayunk, near Philadelphia, named Holy Family.<sup>11</sup> Along with his brother Philip and many other clergy, Fr Michael attended an important gathering at the Academy of Music against the ‘Coercion Bill’ in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> This was an act of the parliament of the United Kingdom which allowed for internment without trial of those suspected of involvement in the Land War in Ireland. There was actually a branch of the Irish National League in Pennsylvania called the Fr McEnroe Branch that raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for famine relief and political action. One clue as to the reason for their passion was contained in an article from the *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, dated 22 November 1882, stating that a farmer McEnroe from Oldcastle, refusing to be evicted from his land, was shot twice in the head.

Over the decades, alcoholism had a profound impact on the Irish in Pennsylvania, and attempts at temperance led to the formation of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union. Frs Michael and Philip were very supportive over this period and sponsored clubs and marches to promote total abstinence. In 1888, Fr Philip warned from the pulpit that he would not hesitate to notify judges of offenders of the Sunday liquor law in South Bethlehem.<sup>13</sup> This struggle with the many saloons in South Bethlehem

6 *The Sun*, New York, New York, 24 July 1876.

7 *The Times*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 11 April 1877.

8 *The Valley Sentinel*, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 18 May 1877.

9 *The Carbon Advocate*, Lehighton, Pennsylvania, 23 June 1877.

10 *The Times*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 8 May 1878.

11 *The Carbon Advocate*, Lehighton, Pennsylvania, 15 June 1878.

12 *The Times*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 22 Feb. 1881.

13 *Wilkes-Barre News*, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 22 May 1888.

went on for decades; it was ten years after both priests' deaths, in 1920, that the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Prohibition never really worked in Bethlehem, however.

Rev. Michael died of a stroke in May 1910. His will granted funds to many charitable organizations, and then directed that the remainder go to nieces and nephews in Cavan, namely Philip McEnroe, Philip Brady, Mrs. Mary McEnroe, Mrs. Lizzie Daly, and in Pennsylvania, Charles McEnroe and Edward Brady. Rev. Michael is buried in Westminster Cemetery, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.



*Tombstone of Father Michael McEnroe, Westminster Cemetery, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania. Source: Findagrave.com*

### **Rev. Philip McEnroe 1839-1910**

Born in the townland of Island in Castlerahan in 1839, Philip was the youngest of the three sons of Philip and Catherine Farrelly McEnroe to cross the Atlantic to Pennsylvania and serve as priests. He was ordained in 1867 by Bishop James Wood at St Charles Borromeo Seminary near Philadelphia. (Although he died in 1910, in 2017, my oldest then-living relative, Tom Malone, reminisced of hearing people speak about him with reverence).

Into this turbulent world of coal and iron Father Philip McEnroe became a symbol of security and civilization. Many newspaper articles detailed his toil among his people, and decades after his death, obituaries

of couples whom he married proudly noted that he had officiated at their weddings. After assignments in Port Carbon, Schuylkill Haven, Pottsville, and St Clair, he was tapped to succeed his brother in South Bethlehem. The parishioners need not have worried that Holy Infancy would be without a champion.

When Philip McEnroe took charge of Holy Infancy Parish in South Bethlehem in 1877, his brother Michael had already laid solid groundwork, building a handsome church on the corner of Fourth and Taylor Streets. The tsunami of immigrants proved that structure too small, and in 1883 Philip began construction of a much larger church on the same property. His reputation in fundraising was secured when Philip acquired financial help from the Bethlehem Steel Company elite, and the church was finished and paid off in time for its dedication in 1886.<sup>14</sup> He also built a large rectory and a school that exists to this day.

The dedication of Fr Philip was noted in 1882, when a smallpox epidemic swept through South Bethlehem. 'In private houses and in the hospital, the Rev. Philip McEnroe and the other priests were ever met standing night and day at the post of duty. They received help for the people's temporal needs, and also gave constant and faithful attention to their souls' care'.<sup>15</sup>

Life in South Bethlehem was difficult enough to entice families to return to their home countries and it was noted that 'Owing to the reduction of wages at the Bethlehem Iron Company to 89 and 90 cents a day, a number of English and Irish families whose husbands are employed at the works are leaving South Bethlehem for their native land, where they say they can do better than here'.<sup>16</sup>

In 1888, there was call to arms for what would be called the Spanish-American War. Fr Philip encouraged volunteers, declaring the treatment of Cuba by Spain to be cruel and tyrannical. He had seen Cuba with his own eyes, having previously traveled there with a Bethlehem Steel executive at a time when Cuban mines were supplying Bethlehem's mills.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Fr Philip's most widely quoted speech, with national reverberations, was his sermon on marriage at Holy Infancy on 18 February 1900. He said that it was plainly the duty of young people to marry, yet they were not doing it fast enough. There were about 500 eligible young women in the parish, and the eligible men were apparently bashful or backwards. Philip blamed the mothers of the young men for their reluctance to permit the men to leave the parental home. On the other hand, he noted that the mothers of girls were not only willing but anxious that they should

14 *New York Tribune*, New York, 24 May 1886.

15 *Reading Times*, Reading, Pennsylvania, 14 Sep. 1882.

16 *The Allentown Democrat*, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 13 Aug. 1884.

17 *The Times*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 25 Apr. 1898.

be married.<sup>18</sup> In response, letters came from around the United States, including Iowa, St Louis, and Texas, from men looking for wives.

No sooner had the marriage furore died down than Fr Philip became enmeshed in litigation concerning the estate of a reported second cousin, William Baugh. William Baugh was born William McEnroe in County Cavan, but changed his name when arriving in Philadelphia around 1850. He quickly accumulated a fortune as a contractor at the burgeoning League Island Navy Yard. William was divorced, without children, and lived at the city's exclusive Girard House and later the Continental Hotel. In his final years, he became ill, was taken to the seashore for his health, and finally transported to bucolic Media, Pennsylvania. Fr Philip visited him frequently, and was with him when he died in 1899. When Baugh's will was read, leaving most of his \$60,000 estate to Fr Philip, scepticism ensued. Two American nephews and a niece, Peter, Matthew, and Catherine McEnroe, challenged the will, citing undue influence on Philip's part. The controversy made the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and was followed widely. Lower courts supported the nephews and niece, until the case was taken up by the Supreme Court of the State of Pennsylvania. The Supreme Court found that William Baugh had indeed been of sound mind when writing the will, that it had been properly witnessed, and so Fr Philip won and became very wealthy, particularly in real estate.<sup>19</sup>

The year 1910 began with a strike and a blast. The steelworkers had had enough of what the Bureau of Labour reported as 10-12 hour days, with many men working seven days a week at a rate of 12 cents per hour. Twenty-one men had lost their lives in the plant in 1909. The workers went on strike on 4 February, 1910, and of the 9,000 employees, very few reported for work. The strike went on for 104 days, and during this time, Fr Philip tried to calm the anger and mediate with the company owner, Charles M. Schwab, who refused to negotiate, and instead upped the ante. Bars were closed, state police were brought in, violence ensued, and in the end, not much changed. However, it was a step towards the strengthening of the labor movement in the U.S., and towards big successes later on.<sup>20</sup>

In April 1910, Charlie Schwab opened a new modern blast furnace capable of producing 15,000 tons of pig iron per month. Rev. Philip was invited and gave a speech at its opening.

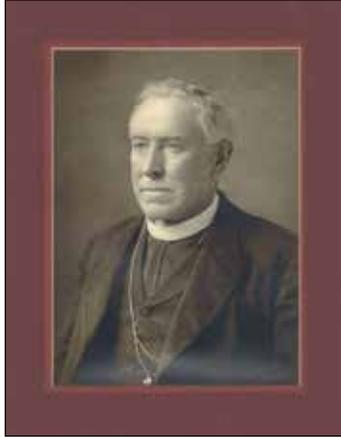
Eight months after the strike, and five months following the death of his brother Michael, Rev. Philip died in October 1910, having been ill with diabetes for some time. In his will he left various legacies, (including \$300

18 *The Allentown Leader*, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 19 Feb. 1900; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Feb. 26, 1900; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Apr. 10, 1900; *Eau Claire Leader*, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 25 Mar. 1900.

19 *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 29 Apr. 1900; *The Allentown Leader*, 28 Nov. 1900; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 29 Nov. 1900; *The Allentown Leader*, 30 Nov. 1900; *The Allentown Leader*, 25 Feb. 1902; *McEnroe v. McEnroe*, argued 6 Jan. 1902, Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

20 *Sunday Call-Chronicle*, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 10 Mar. 1985.

to my great-grandfather Dan Malone, the church sexton and descendant from Cootehill) but left most of his wealth to his nephew Charles McEnroe (1868-1941), born in Cavan but by then living in Philadelphia. The 1910 U.S. census stated that Charles worked as a chauffeur, but by the 1920 census, his fortunes turned, Charles listed his occupation as a former chauffeur. Charles died a widower in 1941 in Philadelphia without children, and in his will, he distributed his inherited wealth among his many relatives in Cavan.



*Father Philip McEnroe, courtesy Marguerite McMahon*



*Tombstone of Fr Philip McEnroe, St Michael's Cemetery, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.  
Source: Findagrave.com*



*Family tombstone in Old Knocktemple cemetery, County Cavan, donated by Frs Michael and Philip McEnroe of Pennsylvania. Source: Ancestry.com*

### **Rev. Peter Cornelius McEnroe (1838-1923)**

Born in the townland of Cormeen, in the parish of Castlerahan in County Cavan, to Patrick McEnroe and Mary Gillick, Peter was educated in the Kilmore Academy in Cavan between 1856 and 1858,<sup>21</sup> then in Latin school in Dublin. It is unclear how Father Peter was related to the above Fathers McEnroe. He was ordained in 1867 for the Philadelphia diocese.<sup>22</sup> He was first assigned by Bishop Wood to St Philip's parish in Philadelphia, and by December he was sent to aid Father Whitty in Scranton. After three more coal-region assignments, Peter found his home for the next forty-one years in St Canicus' parish, Mahanoy City.

In March 1868, twelve men died due to the breaking of a hoisting chain at the Diamond Mine in Scranton, causing them to fall 185 feet. Father Peter spoke eloquently at the funerals to the thousands of mourners, in a procession a mile long.<sup>23</sup>

All the Fathers McEnroe seemed able to walk the tightrope between labor and management. There are no two more prominent Catholic priests in the coal region than Fr O'Reilly of Shenandoah, and Fr McEnroe of

21 MacKiernan & Dunne, *The college boys*, p. 26.

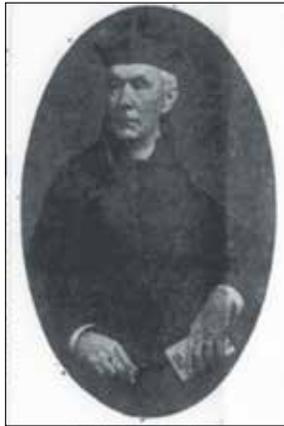
22 Killian J. Mitchell, *The missionary priests and bishops of the diocese of Kilmore* (Cavan, 2000), p. 18.

23 *The Tribune*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, 3 Apr. 1868.

Mahanoy City,' one newspaper said.

Their influence over the turbulent spirits among the miners has checked many a hostile manifestation that, if permitted to run unchecked, might have led to bloodshed. Everybody respects and honors them. They are men of singularly winning demeanor and speech, notwithstanding that something in their faces which indicates the power of command.<sup>24</sup>

When he died in 1923, Father Peter was remembered for his humility and ability to converse on the street with the educated man, the coarse working man, and the children, it noted that 'for all he had an encouraging word'.<sup>25</sup>



*Fr Peter Cornelius McEnroe.*

*Source: Republican and Herald, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, 28 February 1923*

### **Rev. John J. McEnroe (1868-1910)**

Father John, a nephew of Frs Michael and Philip, and the son of Cornelius McEnroe and Ellen Brady, was born in the townland of Drummoney in the parish of Lurgan in County Cavan. He emigrated to the United States, was educated in the St Charles Borromeo seminary in Philadelphia, and was ordained in 1899.<sup>26</sup> His career was cut short when he died of appendicitis in Philadelphia shortly after his uncle Michael's death in 1910. This was a tragic year for the Frs McEnroe, three having died in the span of six months.<sup>27</sup>

24 *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 24 Jan. 1890.

25 *Republican and Herald*, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, 27 Feb. 1910.

26 Mitchell, *The missionary priests and bishops of the diocese of Kilmore*, p. 126.

27 *The Allentown Leader*, 24 May 1910.

### **Msgr James McEnroe 1832-1925**

Not far from Pennsylvania, in the diocese of Brooklyn, New York, I found more McEnroe priests. I am not sure how they were related to the Pennsylvania Fathers McEnroe.

Monsignor James McEnroe was born on 21 January 1832 in the townland of Carrick in the parish of Castlerahan in County Cavan, the son of James McEnroe and Catherine O'Reilly.<sup>28</sup> He studied at All Hallows seminary in Dublin,<sup>29</sup> and was ordained by Bishop Whelan in Dublin on 27 June, 1858. Arriving in America, James was attached to St Patrick's Church in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York, where he remained for forty-four years until his assignment to the Holy Rosary Church in 1897. James was elevated to the rank of monsignor by the pope during his visit to Rome in 1908.

A notable reception Monsignor James was held on his return from Rome, marking his golden jubilee in the priesthood. He came from a family that had four sons in the priesthood. His brothers, who predeceased him, were the Rev. Thomas McEnroe, S.J., the Rev. Cornelius McEnroe C.M., and the Rev. John McEnroe. He was the uncle of the Rev. John McEnroe, then rector of Holy Rosary Church and Msgr. Bernard O'Reilly of Glen Cove, Long Island. He was the oldest priest in Brooklyn when he died in 1925, aged 92.<sup>30</sup> He is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery.



*Monsignor James McEnroe, Holy Cross Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.*

*Source: Findagrave.com*

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Brooklyn, New York, 13 Jan. 1925.

**Msgr John McEnroe 1869-1954**

Born in the townland of Behernma in the parish of Castlerahan in County Cavan, the son of Patrick McEnroe and Elizabeth Taafe,<sup>31</sup> John was a nephew of Msgr James McEnroe above. Msgr John was educated at the Irish Foreign Mission Seminary at All Hallow's College, Dublin, and was ordained in 1893. He then came to the U.S., and after many diocesan assignments, was appointed to St Saviour's Church in Brooklyn, New York, in 1944. He was survived by two nephews in the diocese, the Frs John and Christopher Fagan.<sup>32</sup>



*Monsignor John McEnroe. Source: The Tablet, 8 May 1954.*

An interesting meditation on the life of Msgr John, and indeed all the Fathers McEnroe was printed in *The Tablet*, a periodical of the Brooklyn diocese, on 8 May 1954:

The lowly moss, the shaded fern, the fledgling feathered for its flight, the wary chipmunk racing up a tree, each according to its kind responds to its nature. What a thing can do and what can be done to it is fixed in the very being of its existence. Man, too, a creature composed of body and soul, is born, has movement and growth, and passes away because time, change, and the Divine Will exact submission from his nature.

31 Ibid.

32 *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 May 1954.

Like the shepherds of the East, Msgr McEnroe led his flock by his voice and by their sight of him. His flock responded to his voice because it was true and the sight of him was good. He received the honors of the Church and was raised to the dignity of Domestic Prelate because he was a good shepherd and his flock was intact. 'Qualis rex, talis grex'. His life teaches us that the quality of our life is dependent on what is imitated. May he rest in peace, Amen.