

Tel: 096 31809

[www.northmayogenealogy.com](http://www.northmayogenealogy.com)

Email: [nmhmanager@gmail.com](mailto:nmhmanager@gmail.com)

Email: [northmayo@gmail.com](mailto:northmayo@gmail.com)



## THE MATCHMAKER

by  
**John B. Keane**



You Tube



**January was the  
Matchmaker's  
busy month**

**Read about  
the Matchmaker's  
Trade in Ireland**

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*Cover image from DVD of the Matchmaker 2001 and image of John B. Keane's pub (right)  
from John B. Keane's facebook*



# The Matchmaker's Trade

When John Fogarty of Castlebar advertised that he not only supplied the 'best drinks and the best provisions', but also 'free medical, financial, and legal advice' as well as free matchmaking, he was only half joking. Although this was 1916, many of us can still remember pubs like Fogarty's, with a bar and a shop run from the one counter, divided by a partition. Behind this was 'the kitchen', and it was in these back rooms of public houses that the matchmakers frequently plied their trade.

January was the matchmaker's busy month, although, being the professionals they often were, they were always available for business. Traditionally, people married before Lent, with Shrove Tuesday being the most popular day for marriages. Marriages were still frequently arranged in the first decade or so of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there was always a financial element to the deal.

The negotiations over dowries, more so than actually matching partners, was where the matchmaker came into their own. In the 1890s up to the early 1920s, the local courts were full of cases where one or other party felt a breach of trust in a marriage arrangement had taken place. The papers, of course, vividly reported every detail of the testimony; it was gossip of the first class. In one case from near Staide, a paper even went so far as to advertise that they would have a full report on such a case the following week!

Usually, these cases involved the prospective bride's parents feeling that the husband-to-be had reneged on the arrangement, or the 'groom' complaining that no such arrangement had ever been finalised. The arguments were nearly always about money. One or other party would agree to pay 'a fortune' as part of the marriage arrangement.

Regardless of whether a father was granting the farm to his son as part of the deal, or if he had a son-in-law 'marrying in' to the farm, the said piece of ground had to be inspected by both sides of the marriage match. This was known as walking the land.

All was not always as it seemed on these introductory farm tours however. T.B. Cronin wrote in the Connaught Telegraph in 1939, sometimes (oftentimes?) a number of the livestock on view were only visiting for the day, and would be soon back on the neighbouring farms where they belonged!

The other place matchmaking appears in the local court records is when people were 'found-on' a licenced premises outside of the allowed trading hours. Often, the raiding police would clear the bar, and then find another group huddled in the kitchen, drinking whiskey and arranging a match. These cases almost always date to the first four or five weeks of a year. A man who was apprehended, drunk, by the police on his way home, got away with a small fine. The Constable reasoned that, had the drunken man not been on matchmaking business, he would have had the more serious charge of being drunk and disorderly!

In Balla in 1920 a man brought a number of assault charges against various neighbours, but the complainant did not show up in court on the day of the hearing.

He was, the court heard 'away at Keellogues matchmaking'.

The matchmaker was often paid more in kind (usually alcohol) than in pocket.

Theirs was an invisible trade, no advertisement was needed, and their track record was their banner.

Many were still finding plenty of custom into the 1930s. Indeed, the end of Lent in 1930 signalled a resumption in matchmaking around Ballinrobe and Tourmakeady. It was not immune to the fortunes of the economy according to the Western People. 'Owing to the depressed conditions, large dowries are not now available, and prospective husbands have to be content with a modest £100 or £200, when £400 or £500 would previously be demanded'.

Not everybody thought well of this custom, and especially in cases where a girl may have fallen for one young man, but was then literally 'married off' to what was often a man many years her senior.

'Maucinree' writing in The Mayo News in 1936 described this 'mercenary form of intrigue' where 'young girls are frequently sacrificed to greed or ambition'.

The majority of such matched marriages 'are stifled in cold materialism', and Maucinree wondered what 'reactionary effects such marriages had on the mental tone of the nation'.

Eventually, modernity overtook the matchmaker, although when the practice really died out is anybody's guess. It is easy to look at history through modern lenses, but even 100 years ago, matchmaking was a central part of local life, and the talk of every village at this time of year.

## Did you know?

According to the 1980 RTE documentary on John B Keane 'My Own Place', he said that he did most of his writing in the room directly over the door of the pub, with his desk at the window looking right out on to the street.

He says in the documentary that he was never stuck for an idea, because all he had to do was look out the window at the people passing on the street outside.

## Weather Folklore for January

*Fog in January brings a wet spring.*

*A favourable January brings a good year.*

*If grass grows in January, it will grow badly the whole year.*

*A summerish January, a winterish spring.*