

Interview

Brian Cahill in focus: A lifetime behind the lens



By Cara McHugh

BRIAN Cahill has spent more than six decades quietly documenting life in south Sligo and beyond, creating a visual record of a world that has

largely slipped away. The photographer's work stands as one of the most intimate visual chronicles of everyday life in rural west Ireland - not driven by fame or assignment, but by instinct, patience and a

deep attachment to place.

For Brian, photography was never about spectacle.

It was about neighbours, routines, work, and moments that might otherwise pass without notice.

His camera followed the rhythms of local life: men cutting turf on the bog, children in turf-heated classrooms, cattle fairs in Tubbercurry, railway lines that once stitched villages together, and faces that defined a community.

Growing up in Tubbercurry in the 1950s, photography was an unlikely interest.

Cameras were rare, film was expensive, and there was little sense of photography as a pursuit in itself. Yet Cahill remembers being drawn to it instinctively.

His family owned a box camera purchased in 1934, and as a young boy he carried it around the house, pretending to take photographs.

"There was no film in it," he says with a laugh. "But I was fascinated by it."

That fascination became real in 1960 when he took his first proper photograph on his Confirmation Day in Curry Church.

The image, showing Bishop Fergus and Canon Kirwan, was taken when Cahill was just 11 or 12 years old. More than 65 years later, it still marks the beginning of his photographic journey.

"I was always interested," he says simply.

Photography ran alongside a career

in teaching. Cahill trained as a primary school teacher and documented school life wherever he worked quietly building an archive of community life. In those early years, cost dictated everything.

"Film was very expensive," he recalls. "You had to think before you took a photograph."

His first personal camera arrived in 1963, bought second-hand from a pharmacist in Tubbercurry who had an interest in photography. The camera, with its expanding bellows, was modest but reliable, and Cahill still has it today.

"It took great photographs," he says. "There was nothing wrong with it at all."

In small rural communities, the presence of a camera was not treated with suspicion. If anything, it was a novelty.

"People were honoured to be photographed," Cahill says. "It was a different world."

There were no questions about where images would end up, no social media, no digital footprint. Cahill does not use Facebook and never has - a fact that continues to reassure those he photographs.

"They know they're not going to end up online on social media," he says.

Much of Cahill's work focuses on



Delivering turf for the fire at Moylough School 1987.