

# Rathdowney Hurricane in Brooklyn

John McEvoy the American Years

*By JJ McEvoy (Jan 2021)*

In 2009 I wrote a piece for the Review on John McEvoy and the GAA Gaelic Invasion of America, which pretty much covered all of John McEvoy's life. The only part which was left blank was the eight years he spent in America, when he decided like many other players on the US Tour not to return to Ireland.

The reason for leaving these years blank was despite years of searching, I could find no trace of John's life in the United States. Then last year while in Mountrath I stopped to read a plaque erected in memory of Phil Casey, the World Champion Handball player born in the town. Struck by the similarities between Phil Casey's and John's life story, I decided to do some research on Phil in the American online newspaper archives.

To my surprise the very first result which came up on my computer screen, was an account of a handball match played by John McEvoy at Phil Casey's Handball court in Brooklyn. That one search for Phil Casey in the archives opened the door to all of

John's life in America, for I soon found out that many of the hundreds of newspaper stories about Phil Casey's handball club, also mentioned John McEvoy or were actually about John himself.

Everything that follows is taken from these newspaper stories which reveal not only his life in Handball, Hurling and Football, but some of his personal life in the US as well



***Pictured:*** John McEvoy GAA Gaelic Invasion 1888 Hurler and Professional Handball player

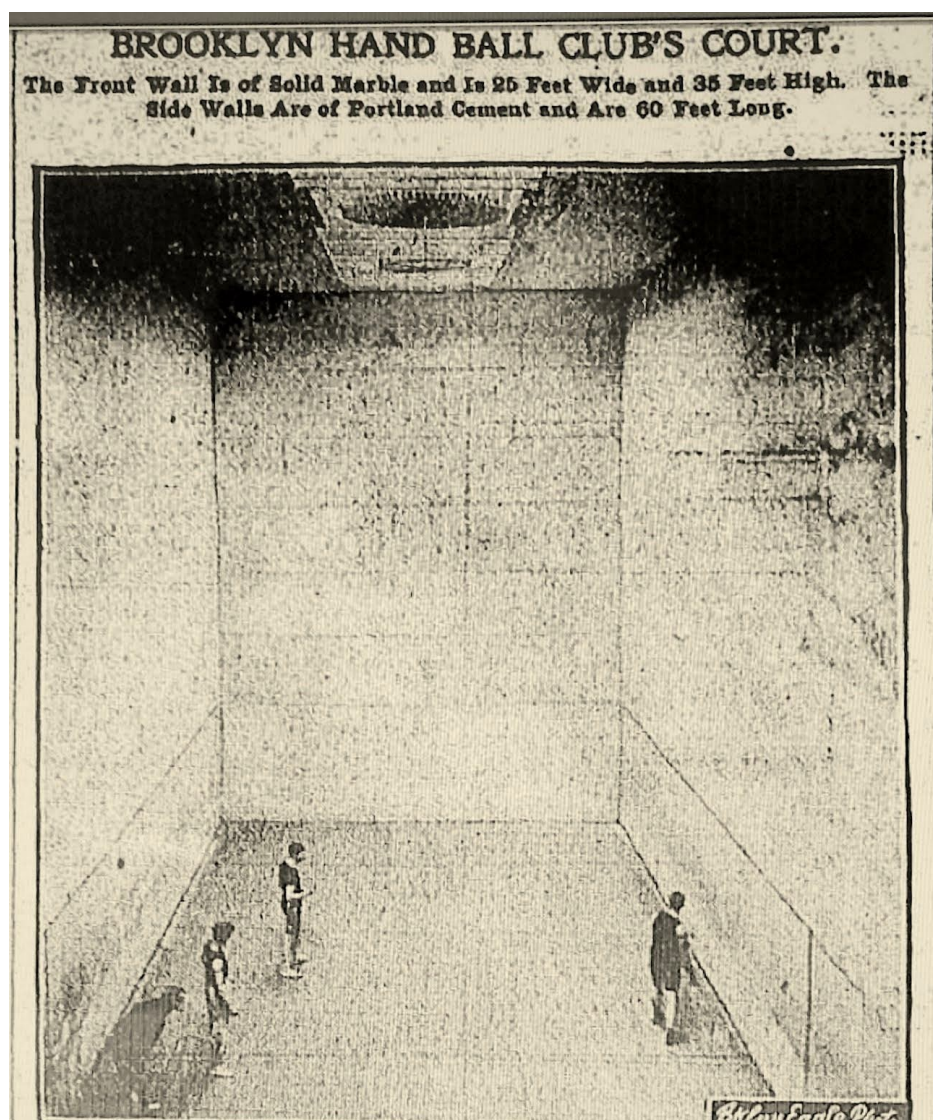
*(1859 to 28 December 1906)*

### **Phil Casey World Champion for 25 years**

Phil Casey was born at Shannon street, Mountrath, around 1844. In his youth he developed a fondness for handball and soon became an expert at the game. He emigrated to the USA in the early 1860's. His first handball match of great importance was when he took on and beat Barney McQuade for the Championship of America in 1868.

Casey's first international challenge match was against John Lawlor, Champion of Ireland in 1887. The first leg of this contest was held in Ireland and was won by Lawlor. The second leg was due to be played in New York but the city had no handball court suitable for a match of this status. So, Casey and his business partner James Dunne bought a site at 297 Degraw Street Brooklyn, and in a matter of months had built on it what was then the largest and most modern handball court in the world.

The new court boasted luxuries unheard of at that time, such as showers and dressing rooms for players. It also had a gallery which could hold 200 people, who would pay between 3 and 5 dollars admission to matches on club days. This was no small sum as the average wage at that time was 10 dollars a week. Handball practice on the other hand was free to all spectators.



The first match played on the new court was round two of the Lawlor/Casey World Championship match which Phil Casey won easily. From then on Casey was recognised by most experts as the best handball player in the world.

A year later in October 1888 the GAA Gaelic Invaders played a hurling exhibition at Ridgewood Park Brooklyn. Phil Casey was one of the match officials that day and this was almost certainly when he and John McEvoy first met. On the 5th December 1888 a month after the GAA tour party returned to Ireland, John McEvoy played his first doubles match at Casey's handball club in Brooklyn. His playing partner that day was John Lawlor the Irish Champion.

John McEvoy played Phil Casey for the first time on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1888, John impressed by winning the first game of three game match against the World Champion. The same day John's first handball match for money was arranged for the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1889, he would play Markham for a purse of 100 dollars. Unfortunately, the result of that first game is not known.

John found the step up in class to playing the American professionals was a bit of a struggle at first, but by 1890 The New York papers were regularly reporting wins by John in both singles and doubles matches. Around the same time the San Francisco Morning Call newspaper described John McEvoy and John Malcolm as two of the shining lights of handball in Brooklyn. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1890 The Sun (New York) announced that John McEvoy would play John (Prof.) Coggins for a purse of \$1000. I could not find a report of the match, but it is clear from something that Phil Casey said a month later during his trip to Ireland that John McEvoy won this match.

In August 1890 Phil Casey toured Ireland and the U.K to promote handball, he was accompanied by his friend James Dunne (born Kildare 1842) and James Dunne Jr., the World Amateur Handball Champion. He visited Cork, Belfast, Dublin, Ballybrophy, Rathdowney and Mountrath. Of his visit to Rathdowney, Casey told the American Press:

*"At Rathdowney I had a talk with John McEvoy's folks and they are under the impression that he has become a world beater. From accounts of his game with Castlebar's John Coggins. McEvoy is held in high esteem among the athletes of Ireland. If he develops into as good a handball player as he is an all round athlete he will be a good one indeed."*

Thanks to The Sun (New York), John McEvoy became famous as the hardest serving handball player at the Brooklyn handball club bar none. It's reporters were constantly inventing new nicknames for John based on this aspect of his game, names such as The Rathdowney Hurricane. The Rathdowney Earthquake. The man with the iron hands, and John Rock Splitter McEvoy. Other nicknames invented for him by the press came from the fact that John was quite tall for that time, this led to nicknames like The Rathdowney Giant, The Irish Giant and the Rathdowney Hercules, (although we must keep in mind that the average height for a man in 1890 was 5ft 7ins).

In November 1890 John McEvoy joined the Irish American athletic club of New York and for which he played Gaelic football in the American Championship. On the 17<sup>th</sup> April 1891 he played a doubles handball match which could arguably be called the highlight of his career. John's partner that day was Phil Casey (World Champion) and their opponents were Barney Mc Quade (ex-champion of America) and John Lawlor, champion of Ireland and number one contender for Phil Casey's World title.

John and Phil won the hard fought contest by two games to one. John McEvoy's name is not mentioned in newspaper reports of the match but reporters describe Casey's partner as a *"novice from Ballybrophy with a sledge hammer like service which proved very effective and of capital assistance to the World Champion"*.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1892, (The Sun) handball gossip section reported that John McEvoy had been elected Captain of Brooklyn Wolfe Tone's hurling team who held the title of the hurling champions of America. The Brooklyn Wolfe Tone's would go on to win American Hurling Championship again in 1893, 1894 and 1903.

McEvoy family tradition has it that John McEvoy was never married or engaged, but an intriguing story from the Sun's handball gossip section on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April may tell a different story. It read as follows:

*"John McEvoy, captain of the Wolfe Tones hurling team and all round athlete of considerable quality, will enter upon the greatest match of his life today. His partner will be an estimable young lady of Brooklyn. The wishes for the ultimate and brilliant success of the happy pair are hearty and numerous"*.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1892 Brooklyn Handball Club held its annual Ball, and The Sun in its report on the event wrote *"John McEvoy and Miss B.M.Walsh were tall and good looking and the noted athlete never selected a fairer partner . Phil Casey's partner was the attractive Miss Celia Wallace"*.

By 1892 John L Sullivan had been undefeated Heavy Weight Boxing Champion of the World for 10 years. His success in the ring had made him a household name in America and in Ireland where he attracted huge crowds everywhere he went during his visit in 1887 . He was also his sports first millionaire. In 1889 Sullivan took advantage of his boxing fame to start a second career as professional actor. In early 1892 the announcement that Sullivan would defend his title against Gentleman Jim Corbett at New Orleans the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, sent the American press into a frenzy. Reporters followed the Champ everywhere he went, anxious to pass on every detail of the build-up to the fight to an eagerly waiting public, even though the fight was still months away.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May John L Sullivan arrived at Phil Casey's handball Court with reporters in tow, he spent sometime in the gallery watching a few handball matches before leaving. John McEvoy was certainly present that day as one reporter concluded his report on Sullivan's visit with an account of a doubles handball match won by John McEvoy and P Barrett by saying *"It was won in regular Sullivan Fashion"* (a knockout).



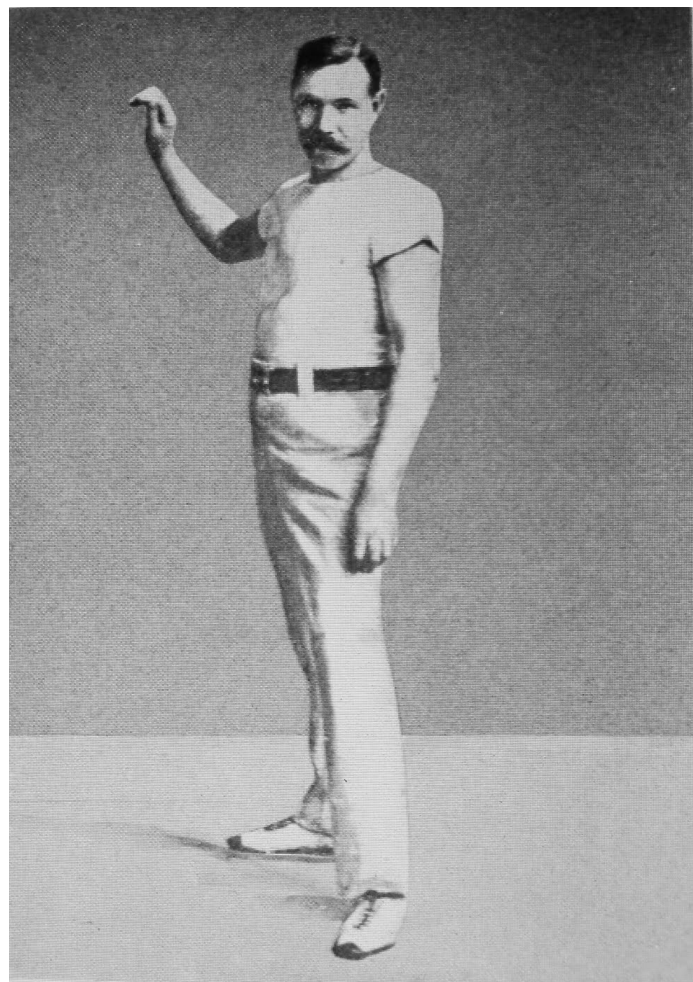
On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1892 newspapers all over America broke the story that Phil Casey would be Sullivan's trainer for the Corbett fight. Later that night John L Sullivan played to a packed house at the Holmes Theatre. Among audience was his new trainer Phil Casey who occupied a private box with some prominent handball players from the Brooklyn Club, including John McEvoy. They were accompanied by Charley Johnston, John L's financial backer.

At the party later John L pronounce himself delighted with the choice of Phil Casey as his trainer. Casey was not as strange a choice as it might seem, his business partner James Dunne Sr had been bare knuckle heavy weight champion in the 1860's. But Casey had his work cut out for him, as Sullivan had been enjoying the fruits of his success for many years and now weighed 240lbs. It is likely that John McEvoy played handball against John L Sullivan, as the Champ spent many long days in the early Summer of 1892 playing handball at Casey's in an effort to shed the pounds and get back to a fighting weight.

In mid-July Casey moved John L's training camp to Canoe Place Long Island, before returning to Brooklyn in early September. By this time Sullivan's weight had been reduced from 240lbs to 212lbs but still a good deal heavier than Jim Corbett who weighed in at 187lbs. Sullivan's plan when he stepped into the ring in New Orleans on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1892 was to end the fight early by landing one of his trade mark knockout punches. Unfortunately for Sullivan the younger fitter Corbett nimbly avoided all attempts by John L to corner him and land a big punch. For twenty rounds Sullivan pursued Corbett around the ring trying to land a hay-maker without success.

By the 21<sup>st</sup> round Sullivan was tiring badly, Corbett saw his chance and unleashed a serious of blows which rocked the champion, then a final right hand which floored Sullivan. He got up but then came another flurry of punches and he was on the floor again, this time he was counted out. The press tried to get Sullivan to blame Phil Casey for his defeat, but Sullivan would not hear of it. Phil Casey he said *"had him in the best condition that he had been in for many years"*.

The new champion Corbett also became a devoted fan of handball. In fact, he loved the game so much that he had his own private handball court built at his training camp in New York. When he needed someone to play against it was John McEvoy's friend and regular doubles partner Larry Forde from Galway who was called upon. In March 1893 the GAA decided to hold its first ever handball tournament in America for its



PHIL CASEY.

affiliated clubs. John McEvoy was named as one of the players to represent Brooklyn Wolfe Tones GAA Club. For once the Sun Newspaper was not on his side and its reporter wrote an article suggesting that Kickhams GAA club should object to his taking part, as according to the Sun

*“John McEvoy is an out and out professional who spends two thirds of his time at the Brooklyn Club and could beat any two players named by the other clubs single handed”.*

Despite the Suns efforts Kickhams did not object to John McEvoy taking part in the tournament. Unfortunately, I could not find any report of who won this tournament.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1893 Brooklyn Handball club held a farewell Dinner for John McEvoy at the exclusive Clarendon Hotel. According to one paper the guest of honour heard so many complementary things said about him, that he might suspect that the Blarney Stone had been imported to Brooklyn. This was quite a send-off for John who was only going home for a few months holidays and would return in early January 1894.

This trip home explains how John McEvoy came to be listed among the contributors to the Evicted Tenants Relief fund from the Borris in Ossory Knockaroo Area. John's lifestyle in America was a far cry from the circumstances he had left behind when he set out for America in 1888. The McEvoy Family had been evicted from their farm at Grangemore in December 1885. A month later in January 1886 the McEvoy's with the help of their neighbours, friends and the family dog fought off and humiliated the County Sheriff and the police in their attempts to seize stock from the family's other farm across the road in Knockseera. This led to a very comic report in the Leinster Leader. The Sheriff would return two-years later in 1888 with a large force of police and troops, this was only months before John left for the US.

At three o'clock in the morning all stock on his father's farm at Knockseera, numbering some 200 animals were seized and driven away to Ballybrophy station and taken by chartered train to Marlborough for sale. This was because the family were withholding rent to their landlord in an attempt to get fairer rents as part of the “Plan of Campaign”. According to the newspapers this was the largest seizure for rent that had taken place in Ireland up to that time. They eventually won this rent reduction in the mid 1890's and by 1905 they own this land.

On St Patrick's day 1894 the streets outside Casey's handball club were practicably impassable following reports in the papers that morning that Gentlemen Jim Corbett would visit Casey's handball club that afternoon. He had turned up unexpectedly at the club the previous evening and spent some time chatting to Casey and telling reporters as he left that he would return tomorrow. Unfortunately for the crowd Corbett did not return on Paddy's Day, but Casey entertained them with an exhibition of handball and won many new fans for the sport.

When John McEvoy returned to America in early 1894 The Sun took to calling him John

Mack for a time. Fortunately for me other papers like the Daily Eagle still refer to him as John McEvoy, when they reported on the same handball matches. In 1895 Phil Casey toured Ireland, Britain and France to promote Handball. In Ireland the party visited Cork, Belfast, Dublin, Ballybrophy, Rathdowney and Mountrath. They also visited cities like Glasgow, London and Paris. Phil Casey never shirked any opportunity to promote handball, throughout the 1890's he travelled the length and breadth of the USA for the love of his sport. John McEvoy was a regular on those trips during which Casey and his pro's put on exhibitions of handball at the highest level to amazement of the locals and reporters, who wrote glowingly of the sports beauty and the scientific skill level of its players.

In January 1897 John's Father died at his home in Knockseera, Borris in Ossory. Shortly after this John decided returned home to Ireland. John play his last handball match at the Brooklyn handball club on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February, it was doubles match and his partner on the day was Phil Casey, their opponents were James Dunne and James Fitzgerald the new Champion of Ireland who had recently arrived from Ireland. The match ended in victory for Phil Casey and John McEvoy by two games to one.

By the end of March John was back in Ireland registering his fathers death at Roscrea. Phil Casey retired as Champion in the late 1897 after 25 years undisputed number one handball player of the world. In 1902 John's Brother Michael J McEvoy emigrated to the USA, he became a school teacher at Public school 56, where he taught history and was director of athletics. Michael also became a member of Casey's Handball Club and in no time was making a name for himself as quite a talented player in his own right. Michael was also a great ambassador for the game of handball. A 1909 newspaper report states that he introduced handball at every public school in which he taught. In April 1903 John McEvoy was best man at the marriage of his Brother William McEvoy to Mary Bergin of Castlewood House Durrow which took place at Rathmines, Dublin.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> July 1904 Phil Casey died of stomach cancer at his home in Brooklyn, he had been diagnosed with the disease in 1901 but he hadn't let it affect him or slow him down in anyway. As late as January 1904 he was still traveling across America to promote handball. On the morning after his death, the headline "*Phil Casey is Dead*" appeared in Newspapers all over America, his funeral was a huge event with three carriages traveling behind his hearse just to carry the wreathes. Michael McEvoy was listed among the mourners at the funeral.

In 1906 John McEvoy returned to America, he arrived 17<sup>th</sup> June. He was going to stay with his brother Michael who at that time lived at 303 Court Street, which is actually at the junction of Court Street and Degraw Street, and is only three houses away from the Brooklyn Handball Club, with Phil Casey's home at 295 Degraw Street in between.

On the 26th June nine days after John's arrival a large headline in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle declared that Michael McEvoy had defeat two players single handed at the Brooklyn Handball Club, it's only speculation but perhaps the McEvoy brothers intended to form a successful handball partnership. But whatever their plans were, it was not to be, as sometime in the Autumn of 1906 John became ill and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November his sister Elizabeth arrived from Ireland to look after him. In late December His condition worsened

and she took him to hospital.

**govern other branches of sport will fail."**

### **The Ups and Downs at Handball.**

When John McEvoy, the big Irish athlete, openly announced that he would play both John Connors and Dennis Shea for from \$25 up to \$100 a side there could be no mistaking his intention, for he posted a forfeit of \$50 with **THE SUN** and the money still remains there waiting to be covered. He said: "Those two men think they can play a strong game of handball together. So they do, and I admit that two men against one at all times is a big handicap. But I am spunky enough to take my chances of beating Connors and Shea, and as they have been blowing their horns pretty loud, I am anxious to know what they will do about my deposit. I will insist, however, that they shall cover my amount in **THE SUN** office first; then we can talk business better. If it happens that they do not feel competent to beat me, the deposit of \$50 stands for either of these two games. I will allow Dennis Shea seven aces a game or John Connors ten aces a game, for from \$50 to \$100 a side. If both agree to accept the challenge it will suit me exactly."

*It was generally expected that Walter John Carmody*

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December The Daily Eagle announced that John McEvoy of Knockseera, Ballybrophy, Queens Co Ireland had died. On New Years Eve 1906 the Daily Standard reporting on John McEvoy's interment that morning at Holly Cross cemetery wrote

*"Mr McEvoy died on Saturday at St Mary's Hospital of pneumonia. He was a Champion Handball player in Brooklyn, a member of several societies and was well known."*

In 1909 James Kelly handball Champion of America challenged J.J. Bowles champion of Ireland for the Championship of the World over 15 games. The first leg of the contest would be played in Bowles home club in Limerick, the second match at Kelly home club in Brooklyn. James Kelly a New York policeman born in Mayo was trained by Michael J McEvoy. The prospect of once again having a World Champion in their ranks caused great excitement in Casey's old club and when Kelly and his trainer Michael J McEvoy sailed for Ireland on the Lusitania in June 1909 a large crowd of supporters came down to the quayside to wave them off. Kelly won five out of the seven games played at Bowles home club, which left Kelly only



needing 3 games from the second leg for a win.

They arrived back in New York in early September also on the Lusitania and on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September Kelly got the three games he needed to give him victory and made Casey's the home of Handball's No 1 player once again. The two countries Champions would not meet again to until 1964.

The Daily Standard paid one last tribute to John in 1909 when it described John McEvoy as *"One of the best handball players of the Phil Casey Days"*.

In 1916 Michael J McEvoy was listed as 3<sup>rd</sup> vice president of the Brooklyn Handball club.

*(Postscript: John McEvoy was also referred to in the New York papers as the Ballybrophy Wonder and the Ballybrophy Strong Boy which is also a reference to John L Sullivan who was known as the Chicago Strong Boy , John's supporters at the Brooklyn Handball Club called him the John L Sullivan of Handball).*

